
HOW CAN NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION (NVC) BE HELPFUL IN THESE TRANSFORMATIVE TIMES?

Roxy Manning, PhD

Even in the midst of all that is moving in the world, three experiences left me particularly shaken today. Each gave clarity about what NVC can offer in the midst of these times, and where we need to be vigilant. Here are the three events that shaped my day.

I awoke this morning to a post by a white friend to an NVC listserv. She asked that white members in our group pause and post any messages about the most recent murders of Black Americans to a subgroup that had been created for white people. She wanted to create space for people of color on the listserv to share their experiences and be received with empathy and wanted to spare them from having to process the reactions of the white listserv participants. I felt a contraction inside.

In the afternoon I went to the post-office to buy stamps for my postcard-writing campaign to get out the vote. I stood in line between two white men, six feet apart from both. They started talking loudly to each other, over my head, about the “thugs” who are rioting, predicting “feral outbreaks” and stating that the murder of George Floyd was no reason for people to destroy their neighborhoods. They spoke only of the riots, of damage to stores and businesses. After listening for five minutes, I said, “Please, it’s really hard for me to hear you talk about this, to hear you focus on the riots without acknowledging why they are happening. I’d like to hear what comes up for you when you think of what stimulated the riots, when you think of George Floyd being killed by a police officer in the way he was.” One man apologized and stopped talking, soon called to the clerk’s window. The other man started explaining how he was raised not to see color, that he did not see me as a black woman, because “we all bleed red.” He insisted he was raised to treat everyone the same. He then raised his voice as he said, “The thugs would shoot me because they weren’t raised like that. They just see a white man, and that’s why I have a gun.”

I came home, and in the evening saw the first message about George Floyd’s death (and indeed, about Breonna Taylor or Ahmaud Arbery) on the CNVC trainer’s list. The trainer who sent the message has been active in the NVC network for decades and had stated in an email ten days earlier “those teaching ‘privilege’ topics in our network are - in their use of that phrase - as much abandoning NVC as I am if I speak of ‘conspiracy theorists’”. His message’s subject line was, “CNVC: In Some

Cities, Police Officers Joined Protesters Marching Against Brutality.” He described, “I feel some hope and celebration....to see evidence that major barriers of stereotypes (“cops” “protesters” “thugs” “leftwingers” “blacks” “whites” etc.) and enemy images can maybe be crossed on a significant scale....I’d like to hear from anyone who can share in this celebration?”

I did not share in his celebration. As genuine and honest as I perceived it to be, there was a significant lack of shared reality. His invitation to share in his celebration landed as a dangerous lack of awareness of the impact and consequences of shifting the focus to the police officers’ efforts in this moment. Holding up these police officers’ actions in support of the protesters lands as similar to the “very fine people on both sides” argument that was made after Charlottesville. I don’t deny that there are many police officers out there who are appalled by the murder of George Floyd and stand with us in condemning it. Why ask us, however, to acknowledge them in this moment of grief and outrage? Is the officers’ support, in what the trainer described as being of “significant scale,” supposed to be equivalent to the centuries of deliberate murder and degradation of black people in this country, often enforced by the police? There hasn’t been a shortage of positive images of the police in many decades - movies and television shows with positive depictions of the police abound. My protesting the systemic, prolonged attack on communities of color by police does not mean I do not simultaneously believe that there are police officers who find such treatment abhorrent. I do. Despite the abundant coverage of these recent murders, most of the deaths and the vast majority of the abuse of black people as a result of systemic racism goes unacknowledged. Asking that equal attention be given to the police officers’ support of the protesters as we give to a specific police officer’s murder of another black citizen that is but one small example of centuries of murder, creates a false equivalency that serves to minimize the depth of my anguish and rage. Instead, I invite you to a different possibility. Create space for the depth of mourning, despair and rage that black and brown communities are experiencing. Give that expression all the space and time it needs. Don’t try to shift it by reminding us of the other possibilities. Don’t ask us to touch hope and celebration before you have created space for us, and if it’s true for you, joined us in the pain and rage. This moment is happening because for once the continued, relentless attack on black people was captured in a way that could not be minimized or denied. If you find our pain and rage and despair unbearable, so do we, but we have had to bear it since this country’s founding. If you need to touch hope - then do so, but do so in a manner and place that does not shift the focus from the depth of our experience finally being seen, finally being held as not a black or brown problem, but our country’s collective problem.

At the end of this day, as I sit to write this piece, my despair is huge and, sadly, familiar. After each experience, I received empathic support from people I trusted who understood why these events were so challenging for me. But my fear is that if we, collectively, don’t do a better job of truly understanding the experiences of black and brown people in America who have been suffering since this country’s founding, we re-injure and harm those who come to us, those who we may be actively trying to support. There is much that NVC can offer in these times, but it needs to be with an awareness of the different worlds

we navigate, the immense differences in the type, frequency and intensity of harm we often bear -- simply by virtue of our ethnicity -- in this American society.

So, what can these experiences teach us? How can NVC help us respond effectively in these times?

Empathy

Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of NVC, noted, “Empathy is a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing.” (pg. 91). Empathy is a powerful tool for healing, connection, and deep understanding of another being. Most of us were flooded with deep, painful emotions as we witnessed an innocent jogger gunned down in daylight, a man pleading for his life, calling Mama, while his neck is compressed by the very people society tells us are our protectors. We are grieving the thousands of black and brown people who have died disproportionately in the United States, and the tens of thousands more who, despite knowing the risk of death and health complications is high, show up for work each day to make sure we have food on our tables, our packages delivered, our hospital rooms cleaned and our loved ones cared for in the hospital, and so much more. Empathy can help us process and grieve. It can lessen the loneliness, provide the affirmation that someone sees our anger and despair. So, show up. Offer your non-judgmental ear to those open to receiving it. Hold the full range of emotions someone expresses, whether it be anger, rage, hopelessness, determination, hope - receive it all.

I believe that if we want to see the murders stop, if we want to live in a world where the color of my skin is not a significant predictor of my chance of dying in childbirth, living in pollution, getting a good education, and more, then we need to truly begin caring for everyone. When we leave people outside the circle of care, we create the conditions that breed desperation, hate and violence. Each person - the mother wailing over their children’s shattered bodies, and the officer who did the shattering; the person evicted from their home because they are unable to keep up with the exorbitant mortgage rates black and brown people were given, and the banker who devised those policies - each one needs to be held with empathy. NVC invites us to look beneath the most heinous strategies and find the needs those strategies were designed to meet. When we uncover the needs, we are not saying the strategies are okay. We’re not saying, “Gee, now that I know your intention, I forgive you.” We can fully acknowledge the incredible loss and pain stimulated by certain strategies, working to stop the use of the strategies, while still seeing the need those strategies were trying to meet. By seeing the need, we can then work towards new strategies that result in far less harm.

Imagine someone who is jobless, watching their family go hungry night after night, seeing no options for new work or new ways to gain sustainability, looking for a reason that gives them both an understanding of their experience and promises hope things could change. This person might adopt the political rhetoric that says people don’t have jobs because immigrants are taking work from them. In their hopelessness, they may accost

Somalian refugees in their community, yelling, "Go Back to Africa." What would I do if I brought an NVC lens to this situation?

First, I would want to establish safety and stop harm from continuing. As a bystander, I might stand up to the person taking those actions and tell them to stop. As a member of their community, I might reach out to others and ask them to intervene with me. I will use the least amount of force necessary to stop the harmful actions, but I will take action necessary to prevent harm. The pain is real, but anger is misplaced when it focuses on victims of scarcity rather than the system that creates the scarcity in the first place.

Simultaneously, I would establish empathic support for any refugees and others in the community who experienced harm. What emotions were stimulated for them by these actions? Fear? Anger? Hopelessness? More? What needs - maybe safety, acceptance, shared reality - were not met? I would find out -- are there other actions that could help the immigrant family recover?

And, I would empathize with the person who took these actions. I would try to understand their feelings and needs. To understand the deep fear and desperation, longing for hope, change and sustainability that drove their actions. I would make clear how much I value those needs, and how strongly I want to help find a different strategy that would support safety and acceptance, shared reality, hope, change and sustainability for all.

And finally, ideally, I would bring a full NVC restorative process to this situation, one that addresses not just the individual interactions, but the systemic conditions and structural inequities that impact each community and contributes to the violence. I would focus on helping both the immigrant community members and the unemployed citizens come together to address the policies and laws that are making it difficult for both groups to earn sustainable wages while simultaneously pitting them against each other.

If you want to show up and help, you can offer empathy that's grounded in the belief that everyone's humanity matters. However, **don't demand or even expect that those who have experienced harm are ready to step up and empathize with those whose actions were so painful.** Don't ask the mother or the un-housed homeowner to be the ones to empathize with the police officer or the bank officer. If they can, if they want to - great! But if they can't, surround them with empathy exactly where they are, and find someone else to empathize with and support those who have been the stimulus for such harm.

Empathy is a gift, not a demand. Even as I know how deeply empathy is needed, there are times when it is offered with a demand, or at minimum a strong expectation, that it be accepted. Sometimes the demand is explicit. I've been in NVC circles where people kept insisting I share vulnerably and receive empathy, with no awareness why I might choose not to do so. Other times, empathy is implicitly offered. Remember that message asking white people to share their messages elsewhere so that people of color could share in the community? The people of color in that group had not asked for this space. First, there is

the subtle, uncomfortable othering one of my friends identified when reading that request. How do we strike that balance of making sure voices of those historically marginalized are not continuously decentered in group spaces, while still seeing their voices as part of, not separate from, the community. Next, now that this space is cleared for us, are you ready to hear our, “No, thanks,” in whatever intensity it is delivered? Are you open to the message that, even if you were the most skilled empathizer in the world, I might not be ready or willing to bare my heart to you? While there are a number of reasons why I might not want empathy at this moment, I’ll focus on some of the challenges of receiving empathy across power differences that might contribute to my saying no.

Many people of color report a pattern where white friends and colleagues request that they share their most vulnerable selves. Are you going to your friends who are people of color now, asking them how they are doing? Are you offering empathy for the first time to a Black coworker after news broke of the latest murder of an unarmed black person by white vigilantes? If you did, you may have been met with a short no or even an angry response. There are several reasons for this.

First, there’s an experience people of color often complain to me about. If you say you want to empathize with me, and I take you up on that offer, stay with empathy! Too often, when the topic turns to race or privilege or power differences, even highly skilled NVC people forget their skills and drop empathy. Instead, people of color are often asked to defend their experiences, prove it, justify it. We’re asked to constrain our language and our expression. If we agreed to have an empathy session, and I say, “I’m furious this racist person spray-painted my house!” I want empathy. I don’t want to hear, “The word racist is a judgment.” More subtly, if I say, “I’m scared because my boss picks on black people in the office,” I don’t want to hear in response, “Maybe you’re misinterpreting things. She’s tough on everyone. How do you know she’s singling out only the black people.” If you cannot meet me with empathy, ask yourself why not. What makes this topic the one that so consistently engenders a non-empathic response? What fears and judgments do you hold about the topic of racism, anti-Blackness, structural inequity and privilege that makes it difficult to translate my words and meet me with empathy?

There’s another reason I might not want to accept your offer of empathy. If you’re only now reaching out to offer me empathy related to George Floyd’s murder, having never before attempted to hear my experiences with racism and police brutality, please know - this is not new. Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd - they are not rare deaths in our communities. The disparate health outcomes for African-Americans, Native Americans and Latinx folks - this is not limited to COVID. If you are truly holding my needs, the needs of my community, you’ve been working to address these issues long before this specific moment in time. You’ve been out there - educating other people, putting your resources of time, money, and energy into education and change. If you’ve been doing this work, I’ve been receiving empathy through your actions. I see you stepping forward to challenge a comment on a listserv, showing up in my community to clean up the graffiti someone sprayed, working to challenge the laws that permit stop and frisk or biased sentencing. When I see you in action, I experience your empathy. I get from

your actions that you see the urgency, the fear, the anger, the hopelessness. And if I've never seen these actions from you, hearing from you in this moment somehow makes all the other times I've not heard from you even harder to bear. If you reach out now to support me, I wonder - why now? What do you really need? Because my need for accompaniment and support and shared risk has been here ever since I set foot in this country. So why now? Are you wanting me to know there are white folks who see and mourn and grieve with me? Have you just finally woken up to the inequities that exist, and are wanting to finally show up and be supportive? Is there a part of you longing to be seen for your intense rejection of what has been happening? If there is, if you're experiencing loss of connection, fear, longing for your solidarity with black and brown communities to be known, this is the time for you to utilize self-empathy - another core NVC skill. Get clarity on all the needs you're trying to meet when you reach out to me. And if you need more support as you connect to your own mourning for the ways communities of color have been slammed for so long by systemic racism and inequities, if you're struggling with self-acceptance over the ways that helplessness and fear, internalization of the racism embedded in America, or even just overwhelm in daily life have prevented you from standing up for people of color before now, ask your white brothers and sisters for empathy. I'm holding quite a lot already. If you come to me with any of that energy that says, "Help me feel better. Help me know you still see me as one of the good guys, somebody who would never do this," I'll say, "No thank you." Because I'm barely holding on, for myself, my children, my community. I don't want to expose all that's stirring inside of me at your request, so that it helps you feel good about yourself, or because right now, in this moment, you finally want to take action, to contribute. I want to open myself in my own timing, when I know I can let go, and knit myself back together enough to continue caring for my community. I want to receive empathy from people who can accept all that's inside of me, in all it's messiness, without questioning its form. I want an empathic connection where I know I'll be met with that deep resonance that comes when we have shared the same struggle, when I can relax into my truth without worrying that I'm being judged as not enlightened enough, or too angry, or too hopeless. When I can let go without tracking your well-being, taking care of your fragility or reactivity. When I move towards empathy, I do it in those spaces where I feel safe, because it helps me release enough, heal enough that I can face another day of sending my children out there, not really trusting that they will come home safely. So remember, your offer of empathy is a gift to me, and I truly see it as that, but I am free to decline your gift.

Empathic Action

I've already touched on another place where NVC can help, which is in identifying action addressed at meeting needs. Start asking yourself - what might this person need? What would help ease the burden they are carrying? I've read story after story of business owners showing up at their ransacked business, standing daunted in the face of destroyed buildings, broken windows and shelves, ash-covered, water-soaked merchandise. And someone walks by with a broom and says, "How can I help you clean up?" That, for me, is empathy in action. Guessing at a need for support to tackle the heartbreaking task of

restoration, when supplies were likely to be limited, people are identifying the strategy to meet those needs and showing up, making that empathic offer. It could still be refused, but in the cases I read, it was gratefully accepted. NVC provides us with an ongoing practice of identifying the need, and making guesses to check the accuracy of that need. You can continue to do the same through empathic action.

Yesterday, my son showed me a text from his college advisor that provided another example of actions we can take that landed as deep empathy and care for him. She sent all of her students of color a simple text, letting them know she was standing in solidarity with them, and was offering her ears, legs, and resources for them to use however they would find useful. And she also offered a specific form of support, asking to be notified of any student who is joining the protests and who might need legal or financial support because several faculty were coming together to offer that kind of support. This was empathy in action. They were empathizing with the depth of pain and rage the students might be feeling that could drive them to participate in the protests. And by imagining the outcome of such participation, offering legal and financial support lets the students know their urgency for action is recognized, the shared reality about policing that is different for black and brown bodies is seen.

The other form of empathic action is to step in when you see something happening. In the last month, we've witnessed racial violence inflicted on people and racial stereotypes weaponized to harm black and brown people. Think back to the less intense example of the post office. If you were in the post office with me this morning, listening to the two white men talking loudly about "thugs" over my head so they could hear each other 12 feet away, would you notice my distress? Would you have spoken up? I longed for any of the people standing in line to say something. No one spoke or even made eye contact. When we stay silent in the face of these events, we may be choosing safety. Maybe we're genuinely confused about how we can actually intervene. If we're not the ones being targeted, and especially if we're not the ones historically targeted, we have the choice to stay disengaged, to observe. Unfortunately, when you do that, I don't know what to make of your silence. Does it mean you agree with what is being said or condone what is happening? Does it mean you are afraid and not trusting anything you could do would help? So many unknowable possibilities. And in the absence of any action from you - the bystander - I'm left with the lonely experience that as I was being harassed, beaten, insulted, killed - you stood by and did nothing. So what can you do? You can take steps to prevent harm, remove barriers to action, and resource and educate yourself.

- Get empathy. Get clear on what risks you're willing to take. Are you willing to risk being harassed yourself? Losing your job? Being physically attacked? Dying? Understand what needs are met for you and not met for you at each level of risk. Grieve what you are not currently willing to do, while honoring the needs you're meeting, and use some of the steps below to better prepare for what you can do.
- Brainstorm and practice some distraction techniques that might allow the targeted person to escape.

- Start practicing. Role play with your friends what you'll say the next time you witness a microaggression or an act of outright violence.
- Get in touch with your own needs that are not met when you witness these acts, and practice speaking out against them, naming your needs.
- Have empathy circles devoted to addressing whatever keeps you from action -- your fear, your helplessness, your worry that your help will not be wanted -- in order to ground your commitment to taking action.
- Do some research on internalized racism, anti-blackness, other forms of dehumanization and othering, then get empathy for how it shows up in you. Being able to acknowledge and work with the messages you've internalized can help you to support the targeted person without moving into a savior role and assigning them victim or less-than status.
- Role-play the actor - the person committing these acts of violence - so you can humanize them. Strive to understand the actor as much as you can so any intervention you make will stem from your condemnation of the strategy while still holding your compassion for the actor.
- And, **most importantly of all, intervene.** Even if you have not yet had time to do any of these preparatory steps, still, intervene. If your messy, judgmental, inarticulate intervention permits the targeted person to walk away unhurt, with an experience, finally, that someone recognized the violence and stood up to prevent it, it's worth it.

The more you practice how you can recognize and respond in situations where someone is being targeted, the more available these skills will be for you. And if you're not sure an intervention is wanted, in general, or by you specifically, ask, "Do you want me to say something?" or "Do you want me to get someone else who can intervene?" Take the risk of receiving a no, and stand up.

There are also numerous sources online that point us to the needs of communities of color and organizations that have been addressing those needs that are still longing for support. I've provided a very short list at the end.

NVC offers us a transformative way of thinking about the world and connecting with other people, that moves us away from dichotomous, moralistic thinking. It helps us gain clarity on what actions are serving life - making this world one that works for all beings - and which actions are too costly in their impact. We can differentiate the action from the actor. We can work to change painful strategies to more life-serving ones without denying anyone's humanity. We who are committed to NVC are urged to step up and use it now. Those who are experiencing generations of harm and those who are directly targeted today need our support. Those who have been creating harm need our compassion and a protective, not punitive, use of force that is connected to needs and does not rely on making anyone evil or wrong. And, as we support individual healing, liberation, growth and connection, we can unite and work to repair the generations of harm that have been inflicted on black, brown and indigenous communities. We can identify where the systemic damage is great, and direct resources to attend to those needs. We can work

together to overturn the systems that condone, entrench and incentivize racist violence and inequity. We can look beyond the individual and ask ourselves, “What actions can we take to create a society that serves all its peoples? To have systems that don’t privilege some at the expense of others? Ones that are truly committed to attending to the needs of all? Audre Lorde said, “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” It’s time for us to put down the master’s tools of blame, shame and judgment, of separation and division, and pick up new tools -- resistance grounded in empathic understanding and compassionate embracing of all our humanity -- if we hope to create a world where everyone has the conditions they need to thrive.

Looking to step into empathic action? Here are links to specific organizations you can support and lists of actions you can take today.

- **Blue Heart:** Member organization funding grassroots, primarily people of color partner organizations working on the frontline
- **Color of Change:** Develops and fosters campaigns focused on social justice
- **FoodTank:** Support these 50+ Organizations helping restaurants, workers and farmers survive COVID-19
- **KQED:** 5 ways to show up for racial justice today
- **The Verge:** Here’s how you can donate to support the fight for justice right now
- **Variety: Black Lives Matter:** 16 Organizations that are bailing out black protestors



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Roxy is an Afro-Caribbean immigrant to the United States who has been immersed in NVC since 2003. A CNVC-certified trainer and clinical psychologist, she is interested in how beliefs and knowledge from both practices can be leveraged to build a world that truly embraces and nurtures all the children of the world. Visit Roxy at www.roxannemanning.com.

Published on
www.nonviolentcommunication.com