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LIFE-CONNECTED AND LIFE-DISCONNECTED MINDSETS

*I have set before you life and death . . .
Therefore choose life.*

—DEUTERONOMY 30:19

One of the most foundational key distinctions explores life-connected and life-disconnected¹ mindsets. With this key, we can discern the energy we are coming from and direct it in a life-serving way. Nonviolent Communication, also called “a language of life,” supports our connection to the life energy in and around us. The more we become aware of this key, the more we can rely on it to inform the way we communicate.

A life-disconnected viewpoint is based on and reinforces perceptions linked to separation, scarcity, and powerlessness. A life-connected approach is grounded in interconnectedness, wholeness, and partnership. Theoretical physicist Albert Einstein is said to have remarked that “the most important decision we make is whether we believe we live in a friendly or hostile universe.” If we believe the universe is hostile, we will strive to control life. If, on the other hand, we believe in a friendly universe, we will relax into trusting life. As the mind shapes the world

we inhabit, what are the large-scale consequences of what we are unconsciously transmitting from generation to generation when we choose a friendly or hostile—life-connecting or life-disconnecting—approach to life?

This key distinction helps us awaken to the paradigm we are operating from and discern whether it serves life or not. We tend to be unaware and to frame whatever we experience in ways that maximize the possibility of matching

and reinforcing our worldview. Our NVC practice challenges us to grow in ways that support authenticity and freedom in our communication. Cultivating this intentional awareness empowers us to make mindful choices, moment by moment, in relationship to ourselves and all life.

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The Life-Disconnected Mindset

When we operate from a life-disconnected state of being, we view the world through a dichotomous lens—right/wrong, appropriate/inappropriate, I/other, either/or. This perspective keeps us in the illusion of separation. Unaware of these constructs, we blame, criticize, praise, and compare. The life-disconnected mindset is expressed in the language we use, which perpetuates social conditioning. Studying the relationship between language and violence, Rosenberg wrote, “Life-alienating communication both stems from and supports hierarchical or domination societies.”²² Imprisoned in our own minds, we perceive power to lie outside ourselves. Our minds become agitated, our actions motivated by fear of punishment or desire for rewards.

A life-disconnected viewpoint stimulates us to react in keeping with conditioned patterns, seeking strategies to protect ourselves, often at the cost of many other needs. This can lead to additional life-alienating

choices, as we seek to meet our needs in isolation, without the support of self-connection and community.

The Four Ds of Disconnection

Rosenberg pinpoints the tragic expression of unmet needs in the Four Ds of Disconnection: *demands*, *diagnosis*, *denial* of responsibility, and *deserve* mentality. The Four Ds are illustrated below:

- *Demand*: If you don't buy a hybrid or electric car, then I won't be traveling with you!
- *Diagnosis*: One problem with this team is that they don't take action fast enough!
- *Denial* of responsibility: The divorce is all my husband's fault. I tried to make it work!
- *Deserve* mentality: We deserve the truth about what's in our food!

Sometimes, we make *demands* when we are at our wit's end and can picture no other way to meet our needs. When we make demands from such a disempowered state, we grow increasingly resentful. Relationships deteriorate.

On the other hand, when we perceive or actually have power over a person or group of people, our demands—even if intending to educate—can stimulate fear. Goodwill plummets. Even if we do get the result we want, it is usually delivered out of the fear of punishment rather than a sincere desire for cooperation or alignment with a shared purpose.

Diagnosis in the form of judgments, labels, or criticism statically defines what people “are” and stimulates defensiveness and/or shame. Viewing the other person as the problem does not help meet anyone's needs. Such a diagnosis may alienate people from each other and negatively affect collective power. Shame, defensiveness, or possibly violence are likely to arise. Opportunities for meaningful connection, understanding, and problem-solving among people with different viewpoints and experiences may be lost.

When we *deny* our part of responsibility, we again forfeit the power we have personally, interpersonally, and socially. When we abdicate responsibility for whatever we do have power to influence, we unwittingly contribute to our own disempowerment.

The *deserve* mentality implicitly links our behavior to punishment and reward. A deserving mentality fosters a mindset of separation, categorizing some as worthy and others as unworthy. Entertaining such a mentality also objectifies others, and fuels unhealthy dynamics of submission or rebellion. Our ability to think and respond outside of these patterns is severely challenged. Fear motivates our behavior.

The Four Ds' driving force is linked to a perceived disconnection from our own personal and collective power. The Four Ds are a tragic expression of unmet needs. Yet we can find value in hearing their wake-up call, alerting us to the untapped power of what we value most.

A Mask for Protection

Connection and disconnection to life stem from the way we relate with and talk to ourselves. We all long to be seen in the beauty that we often do not fully trust is within us. We may try to present ourselves in ways that we subconsciously believe will ensure love and belonging. In doing so, we project a persona that we think is somehow better than what we believe we are. The word *persona* derives from the ancient Greek theater word for mask. We may wear our masks especially when feeling vulnerable, as they protect us from facing the pain and fear we hold inside. But others cannot see our humanity beneath this cover. Sadly, the more we wear our masks, the more we lose touch with our authenticity.

STEPHANIE: When I first became an assessor, I did not expect to be inundated with Italian trainer candidates, yet I was the only mother-tongue Italian assessor. As prospective candidates emailed daily, a part of me unwittingly began projecting a competent persona that held everything together and knew exactly what to do.

I did not allow myself to feel any insecurity or agitation in this new position. I consistently made myself available to candidates who wanted to talk with me, even if I felt overwhelmed. “You have to be available,” I thought. “That’s what a good, caring assessor does. They support candidates whenever needed.”

“If you say no, they won’t like you!” I told myself. “You’ll be criticized. You are the only Italian assessor. Who else should they turn to?”

I *had* to prove to myself that I was competent. At the same time, I doubted myself. “Will I be able to transmit the integrity of Marshall’s teachings? Am I willing to ask of myself whatever I ask of a candidate?” Projecting a sense of expertise, I unconsciously tried to compensate for my fear of not being good enough.

With the loving input of some persistent fellow trainers, I realized how nervous I felt to find myself suddenly immersed in this new work. I listened to their feedback carefully and investigated my own experience. With compassion, I recognized I had projected competence in an unconscious attempt to meet my needs for belonging, trust, and love. I witnessed these self-protective mechanisms and compassionately confronted my fears.

True healing began as I tapped into deeper levels of my authentic self and shared my truth with others. I became less absorbed with my self-image and more present to myself and the candidates I love to serve. I also started to balance time for self-care with the number of candidates I took on.

Cultivating Life-Connected Awareness

Life-serving consciousness is ever present in a friendly universe. When we commit to a practice of nurturing trust in the essential goodness of life in and around us, we cultivate faith that we are all doing the best

we can, given the inner and outer resources we perceive we have in the moment. Nurturing such trust can be an act of radical transformation within and without.

The process of NVC, embraced in ever-growing depth, becomes a spiritual practice that allows us to rest in a consciousness that is greater than our own. When we attune ourselves to partnership with the entire cosmos, we are not alone. The source of life pulses powerfully through us and every living being.

The more we embrace a life-affirming perspective, the more we realize that we cannot embrace life without embracing death as well, both literally and figuratively. Choosing life entails cultivating an awareness of death. When life and

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death are seen from a paradigm of interconnectedness rather than separation, our connection with needs starts to flow with some grace.

Death is represented in the ends of things as we know them, whether we perceive that we have had closure or not. When we refuse to accept death as part of life, we turn our backs on grief. The unwillingness or inability to grieve obstructs our personal and collective well-being. Life-connected and “death-connected” are inseparable. The practice of Nonviolent Communication aims to support our connection to life, which includes honoring death. Becoming aware of our resistance to what is unpleasant or painful, we can stretch—and then, if possible, invite some relaxation into our authentic experience. Then mourning becomes a way to engage with all life.

As a daily relational practice, this key distinction inspires us to connect with the universal energy of life underneath our habitual patterns of thought, speech, and action. Our tendency to judge ourselves, others, and life itself in terms of right or wrong has been ingrained in us. We may personally, or as a culture, judge certain needs as shameful, inappropriate, or utterly unacceptable.

Sometimes life-disconnecting conditioning interferes with our life-affirming intentions. We have internalized the pyramidal structures of domination systems we have been exposed to. To our disbelief, we may find that we unwittingly place some needs at the top of our personal unspoken hierarchy, consistently valuing them over and above other needs. In our understanding of the NVC process, there is no actual hierarchy of needs, though our lifelong experiences of pyramidal conditioning often lead us to rank our needs in such a hierarchy.

KRISTIN AND STEPHANIE: As women, for example, we have been socialized to quickly connect with the need for contribution, while putting needs for self-care and self-expression at the bottom of our cultural ranking system. “Good women don’t have personal needs; they thrive on taking care of others,” has been, and at times still is, a stereotypical undercurrent of our personal and professional lives.

After learning NVC, we both began to discover the ways that conditioning had shaped our internal hierarchies. Incrementally, we shifted from the habit of unconscious conditioning to making choices based on conscious connection with needs.

It takes practice and repetition to notice the movement of consciousness between the poles of life-disconnected and life-affirming. With self-compassion and perseverance, we can learn to redirect our attention toward life-serving consciousness, rather than defaulting to the conditioning associated with personal history, family upbringing, cultural beliefs, social circumstance, and systemic framework, for example.

Relating to the Thinking Mind

When shifting the paradigm we operate from, it is helpful to become familiar with our mind states and with aspects of the thinking mind. A mind trained by the domination system races to label life experiences as static dichotomies or opposites—exciting/boring, worthwhile/worthless,

wonderful/horrible. When the thinking mind mediates sensory experiences by classifying and categorizing our world, this process distances us from our intimate, direct experience. Yet life is dynamic, emerging moment by moment. While we may want some relationships and experiences to be permanent to support a sense of predictability, the only predictable aspect of life is change itself.

As we grow aware of our connection to life, we learn to observe, acknowledge, and investigate the mind without identifying with its proliferation of thoughts. We attune to the energy we share with all living beings, resting in the web of interconnectedness. This quality of consciousness springs from a willingness to deconstruct much of our mental conditioning, so we can touch what deeply matters to us.

When we acknowledge our power to connect with our needs, we are free to ask ourselves, “How do I manifest this need right here, right now?” That question is born in self-responsibility. It reshapes our mental landscape completely, as we move from expecting others to meet our needs to reconnecting with the intrinsic quality of the needs we care about. Our mindset shifts from grievance to a more life-serving orientation. From there, we can compassionately and courageously touch our vulnerability. As we relax into the need, we discover actions that help us experience more of what deeply matters to us.

Touching Our Wholeness

When we relate to our needs in life-serving ways, our core wounds slowly come to light, providing us with opportunities for healing. This revelation invites integration among different parts of ourselves and empowers us to reconnect with a deeper sense of who we are.

We all have within us the power to “meet”—encounter, acknowledge, and welcome—needs in this way. Opening our hearts and minds allows us to welcome strategies that embrace our own and others’ needs, holding an awareness of both short- and long-term perspectives. We embrace the joy of giving and receiving. This flow then ripples outward to contribute to a collective consciousness that aims at serving a wider

net of life. Moved to serve others, we do so in the spirit of interdependence, knowing that beyond our personal experience of needs—mine and yours—this energy is universal.

An Open Heart for Present and Future

Understanding this key distinction is helpful in finding compassion for ourselves and others, too. Rosenberg reminds us that all life-alienating behavior is a tragic expression of unmet needs. We are affected in varying degrees by conditioning and by collective and individual experiences of trauma, whether it is childhood trauma linked to patriarchy,³ capitalism, communism, or climate collapse, to name a few. Remembering that life-alienating behaviors are “tragic expressions of unmet needs” can help us recognize the humanity in ourselves and others instead of believing the labels or judgments we might have. We can then cultivate a life-giving stance in the face of what we perceive as life-alienating choices.

The behavior of children and adults with trauma histories or neurodiversity may be perceived as “life-alienating.” For example, children who are fostered or adopted often take things that do not belong to them without permission. This is usually labeled as “stealing.” Typically, the behavior is an attempt to soothe the internal stress linked to underlying unmet needs for safety, security, and belonging. Understanding the behaviors that link to these needs empowers caregivers to approach children with compassion, inviting them to seek regulation in safe relationships. Helping youth to find behaviors that meet their needs with consideration of other people’s needs, also empowers them and supports the community at large.

A Systemic Lens on This Key Differentiation

Exploring what is labeled as “stealing” invites us to consider what is socially acceptable and what is judged unacceptable. The human constructs of

acceptable/unacceptable, disconnected from needs, are life-dissociating. When tensions and violence escalated in the United States between the Native Americans and colonial settlers, two peace treaties, the Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868, were signed between the United States Government and the Oceti Sakowin (a.k.a. Sioux) Nation. Nonetheless, the US government unilaterally annexed native land protected under those treaties in 1877. In 1980, the Supreme Court ruled in the *United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians* case that the US had illegally appropriated the Black Hills. This, too, could be seen as “stealing.” The US then offered the Oceti Sakowin over 100 million dollars, which they did not accept, maintaining the land had not been for sale. The Black Hills have yet to be returned to the Oceti Sakowin Nation. Their people have not accessed ancestral lands for the sustenance of life for generations.

Grounding our collective response in care for humanity may move us toward a more equitable distribution of resources as we repair the harm done by European colonialism.

The more we integrate the practice of NVC, the more we are encouraged to listen for needs rather than talking. Both are essential. Yet, to express ourselves effectively, we are called to observe our inner dialogue. That inner pause empowers us to choose words that reflect a life-connected stance.

By bringing our attention to the mind’s predisposition to protect itself with the armor of conditioning, we can turn a compassionate eye on ourselves as well as the people around us when we hear words we find life-alienating. This key distinction invites us to find the quality of the need hidden like a pearl within a shell clamped tightly shut. Trusting that vital needs are there, we can avoid the temptation of shutting down ourselves. Instead, we can remain open to connecting with the life energy of wholeness and beauty in ourselves, others, and the world.

SUMMARY

- ↪ This key distinction helps us to relate with understanding to our thinking mind. Differentiating between life-connected and life-disconnected mindsets, we deepen our experience of needs and find clarity and compassion for ourselves and others.
- ↪ Connecting to the wholeness of needs, we can touch the power of what we deeply value, even if not manifested currently in our outer experience, and live from that integrity.
- ↪ Cultivating such intentional awareness empowers us to make mindful choices moment by moment, in our relationships with ourselves and all life.
- ↪ Grounding ourselves in a collective life-giving consciousness moves us toward a more equitable distribution of resources.