

The Joy of Compassionate Connecting

The Way of Christ through Nonviolent Communication

*How blest are those who know their need for God,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. (Matthew 5:3, NEB)*

Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light." (Matthew 11:28-30, NLT)

If you follow my teachings, you are really my disciples. (John 8:31, NIV)

This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other. (John 13:35, The Message)

The Joy of Compassionate Connecting

*The Way of Christ through Nonviolent
Communication*

Jaime L. Prieto, Jr.



Compassionate Connecting
Aliso Viejo, California
www.CompassionateConnecting.com

Copyright © 2010 by Jaime L. Prieto, Jr.

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotation in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of the author.

(That’s the legalese. Please consider supporting my efforts to contribute to the well-being of others by buying a copy of the book. If you can’t afford the paperback, let me know and I’ll try to get you one, thereby, supporting my mission).

Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan.

Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright 1996, 2004, 2007. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Holy Bible, New English Bible, Copyright 1961, 1970. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, and Cambridge University Press.

The Message: The Bible In Contemporary Language, Copyright 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

ISBN 978-0-557-66432-0 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-451-51425-4 (paperback)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2010913657

Cover design by Lori Yost.

This book is provided for information and educational purposes only. It does not contain or constitute psychological or health advice, which must be addressed by a licensed therapist or physician.

About the front cover: I remember my Dad telling me about two ceiba trees at the entrance of his hometown in Quebradillas, Puerto Rico. He said the trees were around when Christopher Columbus discovered America. I imagine the Tree of Life looking like that in the Garden of Eden. This photo is a perfect visual introduction for this book.

The ceiba tree equals life. The wall equals judgment, which prevents us from connecting with each other. The highway running past the ceiba tree equals the strategies we choose that are not serving the gift of life. We run right past the Tree of Life and toward a fleeting illusion of joy down the road when we pass by the choice that brings lasting joy.

About the back cover: A photo taken from my hotel room in Oahu, Hawaii, of two doves perched in my balcony. Doves are symbols of peace and also of the Holy Spirit. I enjoyed their symmetry. One was looking inside into my room, and the other was looking outside. I also enjoy the contrast of light in the background. I see this photo as a metaphor for two aspects of Christ needed for connection: grace and truth.

Contents

I.	INTRODUCTION	1
1.	What Is NVC?.....	5
2.	Christ Integration.....	13
3.	Interpersonal Violence	15
4.	Admitting We Have a Societal Problem.....	19
5.	Redeeming the Societal Collective	23
6.	The Good News	25
II.	ECHOES OF THE GARDEN.....	27
7.	A Personal Story of Judgment	29
8.	The Stupid, Evil Squirrel	33
9.	The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil	39
10.	The Birth of Judgment.....	45
11.	We Are Part of the Garden.....	55
12.	We Can Choose Not to Eat from the Tree of Judgment.....	67
13.	What's Behind Judgment?.....	71
14.	Needs Are Often Confused with Strategies.....	75
15.	Rejecting the Gift?.....	79
16.	Sin as Missing the Mark.....	83
III.	SERMON OF THE MASTER	87
17.	The Be-Attitudes	91
18.	Loving God, Self, Others	97
19.	Who Is Your Neighbor?	103
20.	Being Like Little Children	107
21.	Empathy as Grace.....	113
22.	Loving Our Enemies	127
23.	Honesty as Truth	135
24.	Money Is a Strategy, Not a Need.....	139

25. Serving Others: Duty vs. Desire	143
26. Expressing Gratitude as a Celebration	149
27. Conversation of Forgiveness.....	153
28. Restorative Justice.....	161
29. Empathetic Role-Play	169
30. Prayer as Conversation.....	171
31. Transcendence and Communion	177
IV. COMPASSIONATE CONNECTING.....	185
32. Relational Framework.....	187
33. Awareness: Observation vs. Evaluation.....	197
34. Experience: Feelings vs. Thoughts	201
35. Motivation: Needs vs. Strategies	205
36. Action: Requests vs. Demands	213
37. Freeing the Victim: Evaluative Words Can Sound Like Feelings.....	221
38. Integrity: Examination of Conscience.....	225
39. Inner Peace: Self-Empathy.....	237
40. Grace: Empathetic Listening	251
41. Truth: Honest Expression.....	257
42. Balancing Empathy and Honesty.....	263
43. Openness: Listen for the Strategy, Follow the Spirit	267
V. CONVERSATIONS IN CLOSING	269
44. Scripture Translations to Inspire	271
45. Epilogue	277
Notes	281

Poetry

My Playful Child	111
The Well	182
Out to the Mountains	209

Art

Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil	49
Engraving of The Garden of Eden, Published by Charles Foster in 1884 [#]	55
Tree of Life	64
Sermon on the Mount engraving based on artwork of Alexander Bida ⁺	87
Good Samaritan engraving by Gustave Dore [*]	103
Jesus with little children engraving based on artwork of Alexander Bida ⁺	107
Jesus washing the disciples feet engraving based on artwork of Alexander Bida ⁺	143
Jesus eating with sinners engraving based on artwork of Alexander Bida ⁺	149
Jesus healing a man with leprosy engraving based on artwork of Alexander Bida ⁺	169
Jesus resting on a rock by the sea engraving based on artwork of Alexander Bida ⁺	171
Resurrected Jesus with disciples engraving based on artwork of Alexander Bida ⁺	177
The Well Between Green Rolling Hills	185
The Holy Family by Gabi Kiss (© istockphoto/mammoth)	190
Icthus ancient symbol carved on a cave wall in Fife, Scotland (©istockphoto/BMPix)	272

[#] (© istockphoto/andipantz)

⁺ (© istockphoto/wynnter)

^{*} (© istockphoto/ivan-96)

Photos

Twin Ceibas of Quebradillas, Puerto Rico	cover
The Author with Son (by Jim Alden)	xi
A squirrel in the snow (© Flying Kiwi Global Megacorp)	33
Flying Alex	99

Alex and Sierra (by Nathan Kolta)	109
The Author with his Dad (by Maria Prieto)	153
Church Restoration (© istockphoto/ideeone)	162
Free Ceibas	183
Two Doves of Dialogue	263

Figures

Figure 1. Self-Empathy State and OFNR	9
Figure 2. Disconnected Heart State Diagram	17
Figure 3. Heart Needs and Values	62
Figure 4. Relational Story Dome	190
Figure 5. Static Model of Relational Story Dome.....	191
Figure 6. Body Context Diagram	192
Figure 7. Dynamic Model of Relational Story Dome: Intimacy and Communion	195
Figure 8. Feelings Stimulated When Needs Are Met.....	202
Figure 9. Feelings Stimulated When Needs Are Not Met	202
Figure 10. Life-Cycle Diagram.....	207
Figure 11. Needs Diagram	210
Figure 12. Common Evaluative Words.....	222
Figure 13. Translating Evaluative Words	223
Figure 14. Self-Empathy State Diagrams	238
Figure 15. Mackenzie Wrap Sample Worksheet.....	241
Figure 16. Empathy Sequence: A Receives Empathy from B	253
Figure 17. Honesty Sequence: Person A hears Honesty from B	258
Figure 18. Balancing Empathy and Honesty Dialogue Sequence	264
Figure 19. Desperate Expression Sequence Diagram.....	265

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to the people who reviewed the early manuscript and helped me see how the story is unfolding: Robert Thompson, Garret Weeks, Julie Shiposh, Sheri Denham, David Bryan Esch, Mary Mackenzie, Leonard Szymczak, Terry LePage, Sherri Boles-Rogers, Barbara Deckmeyer (editor, friend), and the editing team at Lulu.com.

I thank these people who gave me feedback, support, and encouragement: Cecilia Prieto Morehouse, Lori Yost, Tamara LaPorte, D'Marie Mulatierri, Sister Karen Sammons, Philip McKeon, Kundan Chabra, Jim Manske, Father Christlin Rajendram, Adrian Godina, Yvette Erasmus, Craig Preston, Jeanine Noguera, Lars, Shaunna Bach, Roberta Wall, Dan Tocchini and Loreene Weeks. Special thanks to my Composition II teacher, Walter Klarner, who contributed to shifting my attitude toward writing so writing became enjoyable.

I am grateful to Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of NVC, whose Center for Nonviolent Communication can be visited at www.cnvc.org. I also want to acknowledge Upgeya Pew (who introduced me to NVC and facilitated my first practice group in 2002), and Ellen Shiro for facilitating practice groups when I really needed them. These friends helped me understand NVC in my early days. I thank the NVC community, who live in harmony with their values, for supporting my needs for authenticity, integrity, and connection.

I am grateful to my *ekklesia* community of Christ followers who helped me grow spiritually and encouraged me on my path. As we gather in our homes, go for hikes and trips, play, celebrate, and mourn, they enable me to experience a new kind of church geared toward meeting the needs of its people as we

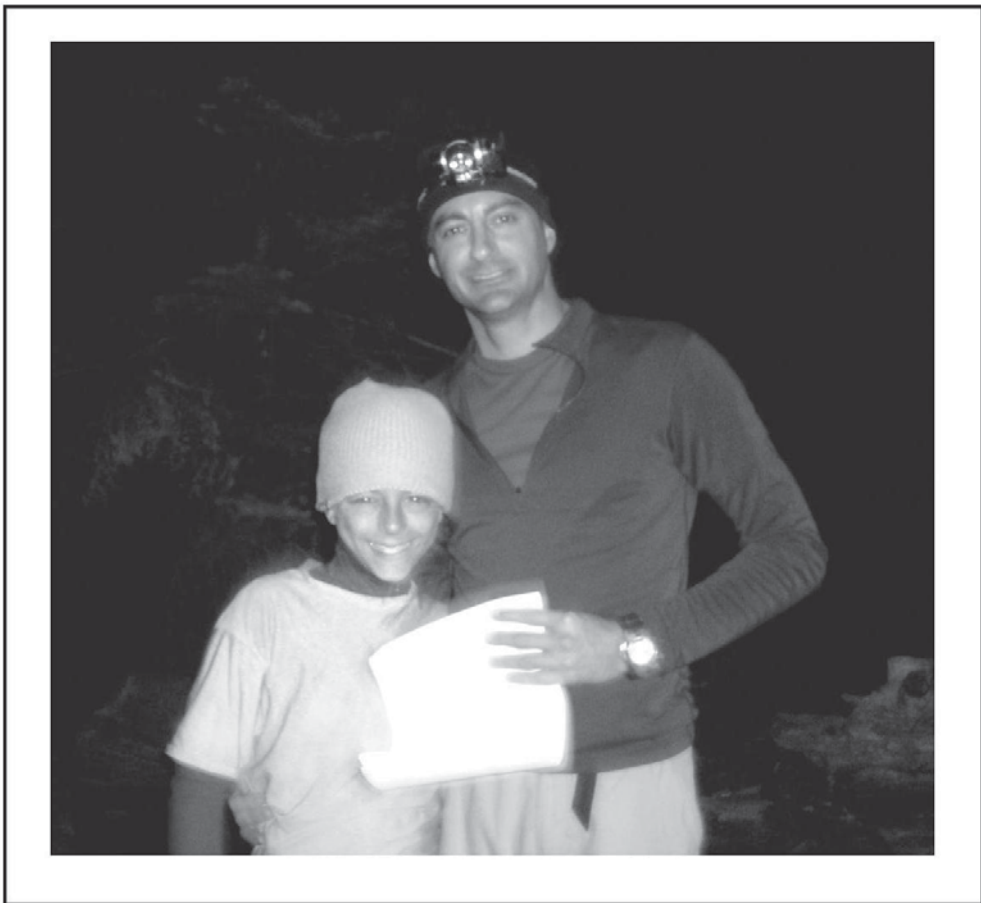
embrace and celebrate Christ in our midst. To Garret Weeks, The Shiposhes (Bryan, Julie, Sage, Sierra), Vivian Soo, Nathan Kolta, and all those who make up the people I consider my community: The Estado 29 orphanage kids and supporters, my "Christ Renews His Parish" (CHRP) family, the men who "Stand In the Gap," "mi familia Boricua," my "De La Salle" brotherhood, Gary and Steve's "Micah 6:8" Bible study group at Mariners, Friday CDM beach volleyballers, my Camp Recovery friends, La Vida Drum Circle in Aliso Beach, Doheny Beach surfers, Rock Harbor Wild At Heart men's group, Thursday Night Men's Group, Compassionate Leadership 2010, Michael's "Soul Motion" dance community, and all the poets, artists, musicians, hikers, rock climbers, skiers and snowboarders I have met along the way.

I also thank my dad, whose example of service inspires me to contribute. He taught me about autonomy. His message of wisdom is to respect others, no matter their religion, political leanings, cultural background, socioeconomic status, or gender.

I am deeply grateful to my mother, Cece, who lives in the Garden and is part of it. She taught me about spirituality at an early age, and she gave me love, encouragement, and understanding. I am deeply grateful for her contribution to my life, for the meals she prepared, for my education, for the flowers she planted, and for being a source of beauty for me.

To Alex Miguel, my son

*Remember the scroll I gave you at John's Meadow?
This book is the next step.*



I.

INTRODUCTION

This book is the result of my own journey into healthy and loving relationships by integrating the teachings of Jesus. I now see his words come to life in my own experience; how new language based on awareness of observations, feelings, needs, and requests (OFNR) has given me a new set of tools that support the foundation of loving relationships. I feel the deep peace and inner harmony of a life filled with meaning. I am now living life on purpose, filled with lots of joy. Some occasional sadness becomes joy as I give my heart a voice. This new language is called Nonviolent Communication, NVC for short.

After ten years or so of growing and participating in programs intended to improve relationships, I realized I still wanted a clearer path toward intimacy and connection. This book is intended to be spiritual but not religious. It is about connecting and, in so doing, healing parts of our hearts that long for love and intimacy every day. Our hearts contain all the vital information we need; as a matter of fact, we got everything we could ever need for a happy and fulfilling life straight from the source—God. As we open the hood and acknowledge our heart life, we begin to feel a natural curiosity and compassion toward others. From this place of inner peace, it becomes easier to connect with other people.

In my search for relationships that worked for me, I ran into NVC almost by accident. Four years or so after my divorce, I moved to South Orange County in California because I needed a change. I went to a friend's house, where a man named

The Joy of Compassionate Connecting

Upgeya had just returned from a weeklong retreat and was bristling with excitement. He told us he was starting an eight-week practice group whose focus was on communicating clearly and with integrity. He said, “The process will help you find more connection and intimacy in your relationships. Would you like to join?”

That was in the spring of 2002. Today my life looks and feels a lot different from what it was back then. I feel much more joy and a deeper peace, as I am finally living in integrity with myself and others. My external self, the one I share with the world, is consistent with my inner self, the one I live with wherever I go. I have a clarity of mind that I did not think was possible, especially when it comes to responsibility. I now see where I am responsible and where I am not, freeing up a lot of emotional energy because I focus on what I have control over—me. I am more aware of my internal dialogue, of my own judgments, feelings, and needs. I also have the power to make clear requests of myself and others. All this leads me to experience joy through a new freedom and willingness to play as I let go of my judgments and accept myself and others as we are.

The self-awareness and the resulting joy that I feel inspire me to engage people in a dialogue of the heart. I am drawn to connect with other human beings, and I want to contribute to their well-being and to their freedom to live a full life.

The truth is, there’s something in it for me. Once others are free and alive, I have more people to know and connect with, more people to play with in the sandbox called life. I have more people to share a meal with. I can join them to dance, sing, drum, or roll down a grassy hill.

This is also the message of Jesus: an invitation of love that invites us to see others as precious human beings and to fully accept ourselves as one of them. To live life on purpose, connected to the source of life that is God, and to remember the reason for which we came to be—to experience and share love!

I invite you to join me on this journey of healing our hearts and filtering out the chatter of our minds as we recognize how easy it is to get stuck there, disconnected from the heart. I invite you to hear how Jesus's words inspire us to live in loving relationships as we become aware of the elements of communicating compassionately.

Each chapter presented in this book is an invitation to follow the loving message of Jesus and to partake in the banquet of life as we find healing, forgiveness, peace, and love in our interactions with others and within ourselves. This invitation is to follow his teachings and to experience the grace and truth of Christ through the conversations we choose to have with ourselves and others. Building a clear awareness of the dynamics of conversation can open the door to a deeper experience of life through love. Jesus reminds us:

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.
(John 10:10b, NIV)

This book is divided into five sections, and is best understood if read from beginning to end. The first section is the introduction, where we are now. Here I offer an overview of NVC, a look at interpersonal and societal violence, and the good news that Jesus has for us.

The second section, "Echoes of the Garden," visits the book of Genesis and considers the birth of moral judgment as an effect of eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. We are also reminded of our creation and how God made us in his image and likeness, saying we are *very good*—inviting us to accept that we too are part of the Garden of Eden. This section explores how the creation story is still relevant today.

The third section, "Sermon of the Master," is focused on the message of Jesus from the canonical Gospels and how his message of love is used in communication: empathy is a form of grace, and honesty is a form of truth.

The Joy of Compassionate Connecting

The fourth section, “Compassionate Connecting,” focuses on the concepts and practice of NVC within a Christ-centered life.

In the final section, “Conversations in Closing,” I wrap things up with some scripture to inspire the reader to ask, seek, and knock in search of the treasure.

1.

What Is NVC?

In *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, Marshall Rosenberg tells us that

NVC is founded on language and communication skills that strengthen our ability to remain human even under trying conditions. It contains nothing new; all that has been integrated into NVC has been known for centuries. The intent is to remind us about what we already know – about how we humans were meant to relate to one another – and to assist us in living in a way that concretely manifests this knowledge. NVC guides us in reframing how we express ourselves and hear others. Instead of being habitual, automatic reactions, our words become conscious responses based firmly on an awareness of what we are perceiving, feeling, and wanting.¹

The following is a summary of my understanding of NVC:

For me, NVC is a means to an end, not an end unto itself. It is a way of getting somewhere—not in a physical sense, but of transforming ourselves into a different being. NVC isn't necessarily the only way to get to this end, but it's one that seems to best facilitate the exchange of words that most closely describe where I find myself so that others can actually understand the intention behind what I expressed.

Through this usage and awareness of language, others will also be able to express themselves so that I have a chance of hearing and understanding the intention behind their words. Through this mutual hearing of our intentions, a deeper understanding that transcends the words emerges. This is how we open the door for the Holy Spirit and how we get a sense

that we are not alone in the world—that we belong to something bigger than us and have something in common, perhaps something to share. This sharing is not necessarily of goods and services, but it can be of those too.

I'm guessing that for many people, the *end* can be different things. The word that seems to describe the end that NVC helps me to get to is *communion*—an intimate connection with the source of life from which we came and of which we share, God. Through this *common union*, we realize that we are intimately connected with each other in ways that we perhaps were not aware of before.

NVC helps me to develop the awareness that I need to become free of the things that get in the way of the intimate connection that I seek. It also provides a common way to use language that facilitates communicating with other human beings. It helps me to acknowledge the limitation of words yet to feel empowered and inspired to try to overcome that limitation. NVC helps me to have clear conversations so that I have the freedom and understanding to choose how I show up in life, to live authentically, with purpose and integrity.

One important goal of NVC is to improve the quality and depth of our communication with others, which is a requirement for fulfilling and loving relationships. We do this by becoming aware of our observations, feelings, needs, and requests of ourselves and others, or OFNR, and express them in our empathy and honesty. Learning NVC is like learning to play a musical instrument: once we have the basics down, we can start to create our own music instead of just listening and reacting to the music we hear. Be patient with yourself on this journey and realize that as you are learning NVC, you may also be unlearning old habits, which may take time.

Observation vs. Evaluation

The term *observation* invites us to separate what is actually happening from our evaluation of it. Think of describing what

you see as a video camera sees it. Our evaluations are the extra things not recorded by the camera. Recognizing the distinction between observing and evaluating is vitally important in NVC. Our evaluations of a situation minimize our chances of connecting with ourselves and others; another word for evaluations is *judgments*. The phrase “don’t judge your judgments” comes to mind as an invitation to acceptance.

Feelings

Feelings tell us whether our needs are being met. They are neither good nor bad, they just contain information about our experiences. Feelings are like the music of the heart. When our needs are met, we experience pleasant feelings such as joy, happiness, awe, and contentment—the music is harmonious. When needs are not met, we experience unpleasant feelings such as sadness, hurt, anxiety, fear, annoyance, and anger—the music is dissonant. Feelings are a door to wondrous connection and self-understanding, a key to our hearts. A reference list of feelings and needs appears at the end of this book.

Needs

Needs are aspects of life that we require and value, such as nutrition, safety, meaning, integrity, freedom, community, clarity, peace, celebration, beauty, and love. Needs are universal; everyone has them whether they are dormant or alive in us. They motivate our thoughts and actions. Our needs are like the instruments in an orchestra: not all instruments play at the same time; they take turns and sometimes play together. Recognizing our needs is a good first step toward getting them met with mutual satisfaction in a relationship and reaching an outcome of both sides being happy. An awareness of needs can minimize violence, facilitate conflict resolution, and help people find peace.

Requests

A request is a personal formulation of what would meet our needs and make life wonderful. Without the request, we remain in abstract thinking and are likely to experience an aimless wandering of disappointment and frustration. By formulating a request and verbalizing it to others on behalf of our hearts, we explore within and reveal to others what will make life wonderful for us, making it more likely that we'll experience pleasant feelings such as joy.

Empathy

We now apply our awareness of OFNR to being in empathy. In order to offer empathy to someone else, we must first identify and embrace our own feelings and needs through *self-empathy* to become present, or connected to, ourself. Empathy shared with another person is about being present with them, offering respectful listening and understanding of their experience, and acknowledging their feelings and needs, sometimes with words.

Honesty

Honesty is the counterpart to empathy. Honesty is expressing our inner experience to another person, without judgment, labeling, or criticism. They may have stimulated something in us but they are not the cause of that something. In NVC, honesty often takes the form of sharing our observation, feelings, and needs and making requests of the other person.

Self-Empathy

Empathy applied to ourselves is called *self-empathy* in NVC. Through the process of self-empathy, we strive to get clear with our current experience by inquiring about and identifying the feelings and needs that are stimulated in this moment. This

connects us with our own heart, making connections with other people more likely.

Tying It All Together

The following diagram helps to put OFNR in the context of a conversation that we might have with ourselves as we acknowledge our heart and mind with self-empathy.

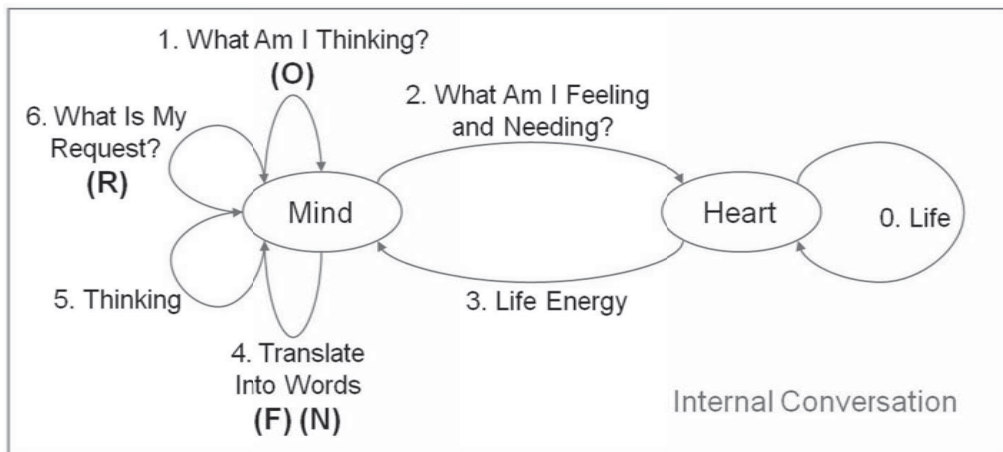


Figure 1. Self-Empathy State and OFNR

The state diagram above, which is a logical model of a dynamic system used in engineering, is a useful means of showing where we are focusing our attention.² When our attention is on mind things, we can visualize the Mind oval lighting up while the Heart oval remains dark. When we focus our attention on heart things, we can visualize the Heart oval as lighting up while the Mind oval remains dark.

The arrows represent activities we undertake; they have a starting point and an ending point. Sometimes an activity keeps us in the mind state; at other times we may move to the heart state.

The mind is the part of us that does all the thinking and analyzing. It is typically associated with the left hemisphere of the brain. The heart is the part of us that identifies closely with our bodies, our creativity, and life experience through feelings and

needs, and it is typically associated with the brain's right hemisphere.³

Any time we feel something in our bodies through our senses, electrochemical signals are sent through the nervous system to the brain. These signals are similar to electrical currents that power appliances, although the physical processes are different. This information travels through the body before arriving at the language centers of the mind, and we call it life energy.⁴ *Energy* is a fitting word for what comes from the heart because it represents formless information that stimulates a potential for action.

The activity in the diagram may begin any time we become aware of our conversation. Since NVC is about developing awareness in OFNR, the place in the diagram where we start does not matter. NVC is usually taught in the order of the acronym OFNR, and so we begin the discussion with observation.

The OFNR Process and Self-Empathy

The following numbered items explain the activities in the state diagram of Figure 1. Each gives an example of what our internal dialogue could sound like when going through a process of self-empathy.

1. One of the very first steps we can take to begin developing our observation skills and self-empathy is to ask ourselves, *What am I thinking?* For example, during a conversation with a friend, I might be making a judgment about someone else, such as, *Frank doesn't know what he's doing.*
2. After becoming aware of our thoughts, and perhaps writing them down, we ask ourselves, *What am I feeling?* and *What do I need?* The heart, a metaphor for our truest self, is constantly alive, whether we're aware of it or not. It has the essential information about our current life experience, encompassing our senses and internal

needs, including physical, personal, interpersonal, and transcendent needs.

3. After asking ourselves what we're feeling and needing, we listen for the answer, which is shown in the diagram as our life energy.
4. Our mind then translates this heart information into words. Part of the value of NVC is to help us create a lexicon of words about feelings and needs to describe more accurately what we're experiencing inside. The words representing feelings and needs are labels that we put on different experiences and sensations. The purpose of the words is to be clear and to communicate our experience to other people. For example, continuing internal our conversation about Frank, the translation might sound like, *I'm feeling frustrated and want more clarity and ease.*

The translation of our experiences into words is not an exact science; it is only an approximation for both the speaker and the listener. Although dictionaries do a thorough job of defining words for common intellectual understanding, they can be inadequate in describing the experiences of the heart. Different people have different definitions and uses for the words they use to describe their feelings and needs; a dialogue about what we mean by the heart words we use supports clarity and connection. There are times when the words can get in the way of connecting with others. When our goal is mutual understanding, we strive for clarity in our choice of words we use to describe our experiences.

5. There is usually some thinking involved in the translation, and it is easy to get stuck in the thinking. NVC counsels us to move quickly into the request.

6. The final stage of awareness in NVC is to decide on a request to make, either to ourselves or to someone else. We might even make this request of God through prayer. The request is what helps us get our needs met, for our needs are a gift from God, to whom I might say, *God, please help me! None of this makes sense!* To Frank, I might say “Excuse me—I’m confused and I need a little clarity. Would you be willing to tell me what you mean by ____?”

Sadly, over time we may get disconnected from our hearts, which happens when we judge ourselves, believe other people’s judgments, and don’t inquire into our needs. We end up spending an unbalanced amount of time in our minds believing the judgments and experiencing unpleasant feelings. These periods of time can be short, as in a few seconds, or they can span over several years, and experienced as chapters of desolation and depression in our lives. Our goal in this book is to shorten the period of time that it takes to reconnect with our hearts; the Holy Spirit does the rest.

When we take the time to learn how to honor and protect this amazing and vital connection to our own heart, we eventually experience a life filled with peace and joy. The tools in this book will help you recover that connection to your heart and find better relationships with the people in your life, be they intimate connections, workplace relationships, friendships, or familial bonds; relationships in small groups, with teachers or students, in health care, law enforcement, or governance. In short, it applies to any situation in which people interact and communicate with each other.

For those of you who consider yourselves Christian, whether Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical or another denomination, you will learn new ways of putting foundational Christian principles into practice and gain a deeper connection and intimacy with God and others. Of course, everyone else is also invited into this conversation.

2.

Christ Integration

Jesus said to the people who believed in him, "You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings." (John 8:31, NLT)

Christ integration is a journey with the destination of a life faithfully lived in harmony with the Gospels. In my experience, following and living out the message of Jesus brings healing and fulfillment through which I have known a profound sense of joy, awe, and sometimes sadness—all of which have added to the depth of my life's journey. To support the integration with scripture, I quote extensively from the Gospels according to Matthew and John.

In addition to Rosenberg's book on NVC, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, I have been influenced and inspired by Brian McLaren's book *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything* and Walter Wink's book *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*. After three people independently suggested that I check out Fr. Richard Rohr, I celebrated the synergies as I read his book *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*. I have also been helped by reading books from Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and nonreligious authors such as Joseph Girzone, Thomas Bokenkotter, Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Anthony de Mello, Thomas Moore, Melody Beattie, Dallas Willard, Elaine Pagels, Larry Crabb, John Eldredge, Frank Viola, Mike Erre, Henry Cloud, and John Townsend.

In light of these inspiring books, mine is unique because I integrate the teachings of Jesus with NVC, resulting in a practical-conversational spirituality. As such, it can be seen as supporting *spiritual formation* in the growth and development of the whole person by focusing on

The Joy of Compassionate Connecting

- The spiritual and interior life,
- Interactions with others in ordinary life, and
- Spiritual practices such as prayer, the study of scripture, fasting, simplicity, solitude, confession, and worship.⁵

For Evangelicals, spiritual formation can be seen as sanctification in a new key, as pointed out by Steve Porter.⁶ In short, conversation and the way I approach it is part of my spiritual practice – a discipline of love in conversation.

This book is less about doctrine than about living out Jesus's values and their underlying principles and those placed in our hearts by our creator. It's about living in integrity with ourselves so that our insides match our outsides. This is not counseling or therapy. It's an invitation to participate in and share the loving, creative expression of the heart of God, out of which we were created and whose image and likeness we share. It's about empowering people and teaching them how to have intimate, more fulfilling conversations and loving relationships.

I quote almost exclusively the words attributed to Jesus because I am inspired by them and because they contain timeless wisdom. I explain my interpretations in light of my experience and my understanding of the Gospel and how it can help us communicate in loving ways consistent with our Christian values. I am not interested in making theological proofs. If you're looking for proofs, please put down this book and save time, money, and disappointment. You must be hungry for connection, interdependence, companionship, community, intimacy, and love with other human beings to get any value from this book.

Each chapter ends with discussion questions to ponder, complemented by occasional exercises. I encourage you to discuss them in a group. My hope is that you too will find clarity and fulfillment by exploring the concepts presented, and will experience for yourself a spirit of love in all your relationships.

3.

Interpersonal Violence

I woke up the other day, tottered to the kitchen for a cup of coffee, and headed to the living room for my daily ritual of reading and writing. Mark, my roommate, appeared out of nowhere and said, "I got sucker punched last night."

Startled, I mumbled, "Huh? What did you say?"

"I got punched and went to the emergency room last night."

My muscles tensed, my breathing got shallow, and my heart rate shot up. He spoke again. "Look! Check out my stitches."

His lower lip was bruised. He turned to the right so I could see the side of his head. It was stitched and stapled with three lines in the shape of a Mercedes logo. "Wow! How did that happen?" I asked.

"I was sitting at the bar watching the Laker game when this guy I used to hang out with walked in and sat down next to me. After a while he asked me why I didn't call him anymore. I told him I don't like the way he treats people. The conversation got heated, and before I knew it, I was on the floor. I opened my eyes and saw people looking down at me, worried. I tried to get up, but they advised me not to. Then I noticed the puddle of blood all around me." He paused for a moment. "Do you have any Tylenol or Advil? I have a headache."

Concerned, I went to the kitchen and got two ibuprofen tablets. As he swallowed them, I told him to eat something so his stomach wouldn't get upset.

"I'm not worried about food," he said. "I'm going back to bed."

As the day progressed, I found my thoughts wandering back to Mark and what had happened. After I thought about it, I realized I was afraid for my own safety. My thoughts went something like this: *The attacker is probably part of a gang. They're going to come over and torch the place. Or maybe they'll just shoot their way inside and then torch the place. I better keep my cell phone close by. I wonder what kind of defenses I could prepare.* Then I started thinking about my son. *I'm glad Alex isn't here this week.*

My mind was spinning with ideas on how to protect myself. At one point, I thought about striking up a conversation with the attacker. Then I realized I had more questions. I felt the need for safety and protection and wanted more information from Mark.

That evening, I asked Mark to tell me more about what happened. In my living room, I got to hear more of the story. At one point in the conversation, I kindly interrupted him and said, "Mark, I've got some stuff coming up for me. Is it all right if I tell you?"

"Yeah, sure." He appeared concerned. I wondered if he was thinking I might be judging him.

I said, "I'm feeling scared, as if my own safety were at stake. I see you as part of my family; we came from the same God and we share a common ancestry. You're like a brother to me."

Mark nodded. I went on, "I'm also angry that this would happen. A part of me wants justice, because he might do it again. Do you know if he's done this before?"

"Yes," Mark admitted. "He's done it many times, and that's one of the reasons I didn't want to hang out with him in the first place. Funny thing is, that's exactly what we were arguing about before he hit me. I was telling him that I didn't like how he treated people, and then, wham! I woke up in a puddle of blood."

I asked if he thought it could happen again with other people. He said yes.

"Mark, I know this is about you, but I want you to know that it's also about me. A part of me feels pain and concern for my safety. I think you'd be doing everybody a favor by intervening in this guy's life and taking a stand for justice."

Mark seemed to take in my point. Then he said: “I’m thinking about pressing charges. I’m tired. I’m going to bed.”

This story is about just one manifestation of violence, and it points out the challenge of finding ways to achieve mutual understanding that results in peace.

Violence doesn’t have to be physical. It can and does happen through the words that we speak to others and to ourselves. It can happen subtly, when people seek to get their needs met at the expense of others.

For example, if I say, “You’re stupid,” I’m being violent with my words. In the extreme, the judgments that we make completely separate us from our hearts, as shown in Figure 2.

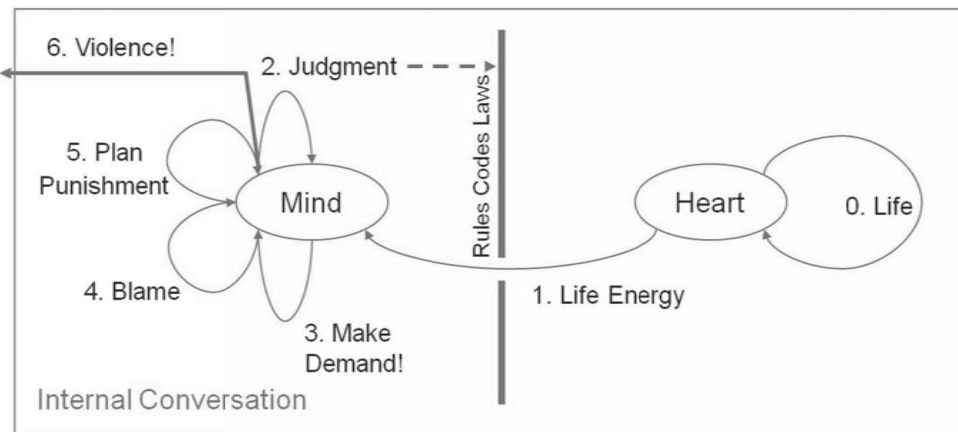


Figure 2. *Disconnected Heart State Diagram*

This is the extreme case in which a person doesn’t have a language of feelings and needs and is stimulated by something uncomfortable. The following examples summarize what the thinking behind each of the activities represented by the arrows could sound like in a circumstance that is unpleasant, but does not involve physical violence.

0. Life goes on whether the mind is aware or not. The heart beats; we breathe, eat, sleep, and go about our lives.

The Joy of Compassionate Connecting

As we interact with our environment, our heart is stimulated by it through our senses.

1. The heart sends out life energy that is picked up by the mind. The heart stimulates the mind regardless of whatever thinking goes on. Feelings associated with the stimulus could be hurt, anger, anxiety, or fear.
2. Without the reference point of a language of feelings and needs, the mind makes a judgment of what it thinks is the cause of discomfort, usually someone else. It looks outside to a set of rules, codes, or laws as a point of reference. We might think something like, *You incompetent bastard!*
3. This person makes a demand of someone. *I want you to do it my way or else!*
4. If the other person doesn't comply perfectly with the demand, they're blamed for the discomfort and unpleasantness that might follow. *It's your fault, you idiot!*
5. The mind continues the blame-game by exploring ways in which to punish the other person. The thought might be very direct. *You deserve to be punished!*
6. The aggrieved person either delivers the punishment right away or passive-aggressively stores it away for a more effective time. This leads to violence for both parties. *I'll get you later, when it will hurt more.*

Sometimes the sequence happens very quickly from event to stimulus to violence because the violent reaction has been reinforced over time.

4.

Admitting We Have a Societal Problem

I'm afraid of delving too deeply into the problems we have as a society. My fear is that if I give them too much attention, they will detract from the message I want to contribute. Instead of getting lost in specific examples of our societal problems, which could fill a book on their own, I focus instead on some evaluations of the problems. I do this on behalf of my needs for clarity, flow, and efficient use of words. I hope you can interpolate some specific instances that stimulate these evaluations. If you struggle with doing so, I suggest watching the evening news one night (any night), recording all of the instances of violence, and noticing how you feel as you hear about each one.

My perception is that things are so bad that I have decided to limit my exposure to TV programming. I'm not saying that the news or TV programs are bad or evil, but they contain information regarding the conversations we have as a society and the state of disconnection with our hearts. I am choosing to focus my attention elsewhere.

All of the arguing, posturing, and finger-pointing in Washington have stimulated anger, suspicion, anxiety and frustration. I see violence in much of the public discourse. Then there are the two wars and all the death and suffering they bring. Then there's the collapse and subsequent bailout of the financial system and how a few well-placed individuals brought the world economy to its knees and walked away with a fortune. They got their financial support needs met at the expense of the American people and caused a negative impact that extends worldwide. I am baffled at how politicians would

block reform efforts, but then, I know that some have much to gain from the status quo.

Even though I live in a county with a lot of money, I don't have to go far to see the effects of poverty on the quality of life of people who don't have much and the poverty of the soul in some who have more money than they can spend.

Money in itself is not good or evil; it's just a tool for meeting needs. A problem arises when we treat money like a need and we disconnect from the heart, losing our connection with God.⁷

In *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*, Brian McLaren suggests that we suffer from four deep dysfunctions.

1. *Prosperity Crisis*. Environmental breakdown caused by our unsustainable global economy, an economy that fails to respect environmental limits even as it succeeds in producing great wealth for about one-third of the world's population.
2. *Equity Crisis*. The growing gap between the ultrarich and the extremely poor, which prompts the poor majority to envy, resent, and even hate the rich minority, which in turn elicits fear and anger in the rich.
3. *Security Crisis*. The danger of cataclysmic war arising from the intensifying resentment and fear among various groups at opposite ends of the economic spectrum.
4. *Spiritual Crisis*. The failure of the world's religions, especially its two largest religions, Christianity and Islam,⁸ to provide a framing story capable of healing or reducing the other three crises.

I agree with McLaren that the fourth of these is the leverage point for healing the first three; this book addresses the spiritual crisis by applying the teachings of Jesus in the practical conversational framework of NVC.

McLaren identifies the most crucial global problems, which I translate into the following societal needs not being adequately met: safety, justice, education, equality, environmental and personal health, peace, stability, financial support, and fairness. With awareness of our needs and a connection to our hearts, we begin to feel a natural desire to reform the system so that it can support the needs and values of the people it's intended to serve. This typically results in a strategy of transforming the governments so that they serve the needs of their people in equitable, open, and transparent ways.

In *The Powers That Be*, Walter Wink points out the following about the collective spirit of human institutions, which he calls the Powers.

The Powers are good.

The Powers are fallen.

*The Powers must be redeemed.*⁹

5.

Redeeming the Societal Collective

Redemption is not something that we can do ourselves or demand from God. We could sit back in despair, blame others, continue to follow the path we're on, or we could choose to follow the teachings of Jesus in our path toward God, accepting his grace, seeing the truth of our experience, connecting to others, and listening for the Holy Spirit's guidance in finding strategies for meeting everyone's needs. Once we have an awareness of needs, we can begin to have a dialogue about how getting our needs met at the expense of others is missing the heart of God. We can also talk about meeting someone else's needs at the expense of our own. Both of these are forms of violence, also known as sin.

It is through the collective efforts at connecting through our hearts, embracing the wisdom already there, and spurring action from those awake enough to be the change they want that human institutions will be redeemed. Through this conversation of the heart and mind, we can taste the soul and strength from the living water of Christ. We begin to do things not out of duty, obligation, legal requirements, or to buy someone's love, but with integrity because it brings us joy to participate in the banquet of life. We find our place at the table with our larger family of humanity, with Jesus smiling and passing the bread and wine around the table.

This is the journey to which you are invited in this book. I hope that at the very least, it will stimulate lots of dialogue about the nature of conversation and how Christ is alive, well, and present in our lives if we choose to let him in.

This book addresses the societal spiritual crisis by showing that Jesus's message can help us reframe our conversations and

The Joy of Compassionate Connecting

bring about deeper connection and intimacy with others. We can recover our hearts, both individually and collectively.

My hypothesis is that by healing our hearts and learning ways to communicate in which everyone's needs are considered, we'll find a path that leads to solving our problems; I wouldn't be surprised if we also experience some joy along the way toward peace. This book is about empowering individuals with the tools to connect. The good news is that Jesus has been pointing us in that direction for a couple of millennia.

6.

The Good News

The solution to our problems lies much closer to home than in Washington and all the other capitals in the world. It resides in the space that is closer to the heart.

Our natural tendency, when presented with a stressful situation, is to fight, flee, or freeze.¹⁰ More often than not, I have chosen to fight instead of flee. My experience tells me that everyone suffers when I choose violence – when I choose to sin.

Jesus presents us with a new option to transcend these tendencies.¹¹ He invites us to connect to his spirit, offer the grace we've received, listen to others through love, speak our truth in love, and find new ways to address our current challenges. In fact, he said that he would send us a counselor to help us who is available to us *now*.¹² We just need to be willing to let go of our worldly strategies and engage each other in a heartfelt conversation, discovering the truth of our collective experience. He is inviting us to a life fully lived in his presence and to experience the commonality of humanity through love. And to be invited to a banquet of the spirit is for me a glorious opportunity not to be missed.¹³

