

Compassion: Mature, Astute & Courageous

With Rachelle Lamb

For both seasoned and new NVC aficionados, I think many would agree that the word 'empathy' typically becomes central to one's understanding of what NVC is all about. One might even argue that empathy is itself synonymous with NVC. The beauty of this strong pairing is, of course, the wonderful capacity for one human being to listen to another human being in a manner that is likely to support mutual openness and connection. How could anyone object?

One of the pitfalls however of understanding NVC as being primarily about empathy is that if some quantifiable measure of mutual openness and connection doesn't result from an exchange where at least one person is ostensibly adhering to basic NVC methodology, it can be concluded that that person is failing to practice NVC and is not being empathic.

"You're not doing NVC!" "That's not empathy!" "You're not connecting with my needs!"

The measure of "good" empathy and "good" NVC is tragically and all too often based on whether or not a person feels in some way "soothed" and "comforted" by the exchange, or at the very least feels in no way "threatened" by it. In other words, if you don't speak to me in a way that I perceive to be in keeping with my own understanding of NVC which, if I examine that understanding closely is typically rooted in how I "feel" when you speak with me, then you're failing at NVC.

One of the casualties, it seems to me, of making empathy synonymous with NVC is how objective honesty, which inherently requires us to consider behavioral and systemic change, can inadvertently slip from purview. Without real honesty, the need for behavioral and systemic change is less likely to receive attention and be acted upon.

Making empathy synonymous with NVC is appealing, seductive and finally dangerous .. because empathy can all too often and easily become the feel-good drug we become addicted to whereas being on the receiving end of someone's honesty and appeal for change, especially when it asks something of us that we are not immediately inclined to recognize from within our current belief system, can come across to us as criticism or judgment even when the other person is expressing their honesty cleanly and responsibly in accordance with NVC principles. In fact, the more articulately and responsibly someone speaks at times, the more upset we can become. What a surprise! Isn't NVC supposed to make things better?

Sometimes the status quo has prevailed for so long that honesty is not tender but is instead edgy, gritty and downright uncomfortable .. as in this powerful scene from the film Hidden Figures:
<https://youtu.be/9j6p7ajuh-E>

The very first paragraph of Marshall Rosenberg's book Nonviolent Communication reads as follows...

Believing that it is our nature to enjoy giving and receiving in a compassionate manner, I have been preoccupied most of my life with two questions: What happens to disconnect us from our

compassionate nature, leading us to behave violently and exploitatively? And conversely, what allows some people to stay connected to their compassionate nature under even the most trying circumstances?

On the page immediately following Marshall goes on:

I am thinking of people like Etty Hillesum, who remained compassionate even while subjected to the grotesque conditions of a German concentration camp. As she wrote in her journal at the time, I am not easily frightened. Not because I am brave but because I know that I am dealing with human beings and that I must try as hard as I can to understand everything that anyone ever does. And that was the real import of this morning: not that a disgruntled young Gestapo officer yelled at me, but that I felt no indignation, rather a real compassion, and would have liked to ask, 'Did you have a very unhappy childhood, has your girlfriend let you down?' Yes, he looked harassed and driven, sullen and weak. I should have liked to start treating him there and then, for I know that pitiful young men like that are dangerous as soon as they are let loose on mankind. —Etty Hillesum in *Etty: A Diary 1941–1943*

It's noteworthy that there is no verbal exchange between Etty Hillesum and the Gestapo officer aside from the officer yelling at her. Hillesum nonetheless expands upon the incident in her journals by shedding light on the broader context .. with an insight that recognizes that we do not live our lives isolated from the larger landscapes in which our lives unfold but rather that we are profoundly affected by the socio-cultural narratives of the particular times into which we are born.

Hillesum does not extend a verbal empathic guess around what the officer may be feeling and needing. Speaking to him would have brought her unwelcome attention and very possibly placed her already endangered life in immediate peril. And yet Marshall highlights her awareness as both exemplary and compassionate, which suggests that he is less interested in any specific result related to the actual exchange than he is inspired by her capacity to possess a certain quality of awareness and wisdom, to begin with. The achievement is that she is able to "stay connected to her compassionate nature under even the most trying circumstances." **It is her capacity for this quality of awareness that is key.**

We might well describe Etty Hillesum, who died at the age of 29 in Auschwitz, less than one year after writing those words, as a mature, astute and courageous witness testifying to the conditions that we so often overlook in our well established and habituated ways of seeing .. conditions that are at the root of so many of the horrors and tragedies that human beings perpetrate upon each other and the planet. It is Hillesum's **way of seeing and perceiving beyond the personal** that grants her compassion, not a formulaic assessment of feelings or needs. In fact our **way of seeing** dictates and governs what we actually see and the accompanying responses we have. We might well say that **the more we are able to fully appreciate the broader landscape of a situation, the more compassionate we become.**

For instance, we might be disturbed to learn that a man has stolen money from his father. But when we learn that he is 22 years old, unemployed and unable to put food on the table for his wife and newborn and that his relationship with his father is strained, we discover a compassion that was less available to us before we knew of his circumstances. The compassion doesn't justify his actions but we see him as human through our human eyes.

Marshall described empathy as "a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing." It's useful to recognize that our experiences are not only highly subjective but that they are firmly fastened

to personal biases, socio-cultural biases, religious biases, economic biases, history, etc. Our experiences and how we describe them are coloured by much more than we are ever fully aware of.

Given this subjectivity, we do not, nor can we, take every single influence of each particular event or experience into account. We can, however, gain significant skill in being able to discern and curate more and more of the numerous influences that weigh in on the various events and experiences of both our personal and collective lives. We can more consistently make conscientious and upright choices about how we live and how we articulate our experiences. We can cultivate an ever-deepening awareness of the influences that impact us and the lives of our fellow humans so that we don't become myopic and rigid in our understandings.

Any one of the following responses to the Gestapo officer would qualify as being accurate on some level and yet the majority would likely be rejected:

- Are you feeling irritated because you'd appreciate more cooperation from the prisoners?
- Are you feeling irritated because there are things happening in your personal life that are generating pain for you?
- Are you feeling irritated because you perceive yourself to be trapped within a political régime that views some humans as superior and perpetrates horrors as a result?
- Are you feeling irritated because the work you're engaged in on a daily basis isn't in alignment with the life you had once imagined for yourself?
- Are you feeling irritated because your needs for meaning and joy are so rarely met when the bulk of your time is spent with people you have been taught to hate?

While each of these guesses effectively names some aspect of the Gestapo officer's experience, it is my guess that only the first one would be acceptable to him, at least in the context of the officer-prisoner relationship. And that is because it is the only response that neither threatens the officer's agenda nor the existing officer-prisoner relationship .. whereas the other responses draw attention to external influences and call into question the nature of the relationship itself as well as the nature of the socio-political thinking of the time. It becomes clear that larger forces are at play and in fact create the conditions for the injustice to take place. In many situations, to recognize and name the larger forces is to challenge a person's allegiance and actions. It's typically not welcome.

What is the overall cost however of locking ourselves into response patterns where the only understanding of empathy is one that doesn't upset the personal status quo? How is social change possible if we're not willing to feel the awkwardness and discomfort of acknowledging the ways in which we are accomplices to injustices we would rather not know about?

Hillesum recognizes the tragedy of the situation in such a way that exposes the fact that people are suffering at the hands of a terrorizing dehumanizing régime.

Although she doesn't say it outright, it could be said that the following understandings inform her response...

- she and other fellow humans are being held captive unjustly;
- many people are being treated cruelly;
- to treat others cruelly is inhumane;
- unresolved issues in our lives don't disappear but instead find other ways to the surface where they often become destructive;
- indoctrination, threats, and coercion can lead people to commit horrors;

- to hate another because he or she treats you or others poorly is no victory for anyone and is a blemish on the human race when it becomes the de facto standard for engagement;
- we can make the choice to respond humanely, even when there is no outwardly recognizable benefit to us in making that choice.

Without this depth of awareness, Hillesum's inner dialogue and journal entry would likely have been much different. Perhaps something like, "That pig!! He has no business treating us this way!! I hope he burns in hell!!" Welcome to retributive thinking and conflict that only escalates.

I think it could be said that one of the hallmarks of compassion is not that it puts an end to injustice or that it repairs relationships, though sometimes it can do both, but that it anchors a person to their deep humanity and spiritual core in the face of adverse circumstances. We can be sure too that life will fairly routinely present us with situations where the integrity and strength of our compassion will be tested over and over again. And so, while the words we speak should be well and deeply attended to, it's just as important that we attend to who we are and what we ultimately stand for.

In **Letters From Westerbork**, Etty Hillesum writes, "The sky is full of birds, the purple lupins stand up so regally and peacefully, two little old women have sat down for a chat, the sun is shining on my face - and right before our eyes, mass murder... The whole thing is simply beyond comprehension."

I don't think the revolution we're yearning for will come from "feel good" empathy. Rather I think it will come from a robust ability to see courageously and fully what is happening to us and around us. It will come from our ability to speak about what we see, especially where we witness destruction and tragedy, with a generosity and wisdom that continually affirms our love for life.

Rachelle Lamb's lifelong interest in human development, relationship dynamics and the roles that culture and ecology play in people's lives, along with her ability to skilfully pave the way for transformational dialogue between people consistently produces powerful learning experiences for individuals and audiences. Learn more about her at www.RachelleLamb.com.