

NVC Conversations About Privilege and Power-Over

With Dian Killian

Last year, Mary Mackenzie of the NVC Academy (NVCA) organized an online symposium [Removing Our Blinders: Seeing the Impact of Power and Privilege](#) that I consider courageous and visionary. The symposium offered an opportunity for those of European background, men, women, and people of color to share their experiences and for others to empathically listen. The calls struck me as poignant, empathic, moving and connecting.

In the context of my co-leading one of the fishbowls and symposiums, I received an email from someone who had emailed all the trainers involved in the symposium challenging our involvement in these discussions. This person shared with me that, in their opinion, “there’s no correlation when talking about subjective differences such as privilege and NVC...” I took time to respond to this person at length (out of care and respect) and I am sharing now excerpts from my response publicly (with some additions) which, I hope, will further open up discussion around a topic that I consider vital to the full expression of NVC, which I see as ultimately focused on power-sharing, collaboration, peace-making, and holding all needs with care.

As someone living in the US, these questions are especially compelling and even urgent for me. I have read and watched numerous incidents of people of color dying in interactions with police that I consider unacceptable and characterized by excessive use of force. Eric Garner in my home city, for example, was choked by police and died when selling cigarettes. We now have the incidents of this past weekend in Charlottesville, VA. The past few weeks, leaders of the US and North Korea were speaking in very specific terms about using nuclear bombs (an ultimate use of power?). I am writing this with a desire to see healing and transformation for all of us—individually and on a societal and global level.

HERE IS MY LETTER:

Dear (friend),

First of all, I am not surprised to hear that this topic of “privilege” is a trigger for you, since I know it is for some people. In particular, there has been what I would consider extensive discussion on the CNVC Certified Trainers list. (I don’t believe you are a certified trainer, so I guess you probably have not seen it).

What is interesting and stands out for me is how so many people are also excited and relieved about this topic, and that NVC Academy (in particular with the symposium) has brought it forward into discussion. Each time I have sent the emails out about the NVC Academy fishbowls and the Symposium (Mary asked me to co-facilitate two), I have received numerous emails of gratitude and appreciation. I have had more of a response to these emails than to any other email I have sent out (this is over 15 years). And I don’t think it’s simply how the letters are written—although I like how the NVCA staff wrote them. I think it’s the topic, and opening this topic up. This is what I have heard gratitude about in particular.

You are the first to contact me directly with concerns and, again, I know there are some who are concerned from the CNVC Certified trainers list. At the core of the concerns, I hear anxiety around “privilege” being a label or evaluation, so out of alignment with NVC and its values. More, as a “label,” that this concept would get in the way of connection and

understanding (rather than facilitate it). And, as related to all this, I hear concern that Marshall would not have approved of or wanted this term used. Ultimately, there is a desire to protect the integrity and practice of NVC, and its further growth and impact in the world. I also think some simply want clarity: When you talk about privilege, what are talking about exactly? (To use NVC terms, what are the observations?)

I want to speak to these concerns.

Personally, I heard Marshall repeatedly speak of his vision and desire to see NVC as a form of social change (for examples, see the two interviews I conducted with him for [The Cleveland Free Times](#) and [The Sun magazine](#)). He also repeatedly referenced books such as Walter Wink's *The Powers that Be* and Rianne Eisler's, *The Chalice and the Blade*, both of which concern power in human society, how it has shifted over thousands of years, and how (in the case of Wink's book) civil disobedience is a nonviolent challenge of power and its "habits" and structures. For Marshall, I believe the compelling question for him was: How can all people and all beings' needs matter and be held with care? As part of this (as illustrated by the book references above), he questioned and even challenged hierarchal structures, power over, and societal norms and expectations where power resided (his referring—with his characteristic humor—to corporations as "gangs" is one example of this). "Power-over" is a "label" or term that Marshall used repeatedly. This is what I see "privilege" referencing: "power-over" patterns on a societal level in how we relate to each other and all life. That he decided to call the practice he developed "Nonviolent Communication" and saw NVC as a direct extension of Gandhi's principles, is the ultimate example of his views and intentions. I don't think I need to remind anyone that Gandhi was focused on civil disobedience, a radical way of practicing compassion to challenge power and power-over. Marshall saw NVC as an extension of these principles. In effect, NVC is Rosenberg's "experiment" in direct action everyday, in each conversation and interaction.

My sense is that there is pain, at least in the US, around access to power (i.e., resources and opportunities), including physical safety, health, housing, etc., and how to most effectively address and heal these imbalances. Internationally, I wonder: how has the impact of colonialism in the world been fully named or addressed? And how many nations are still now (decades later) recovering/rebuilding from the impact? How has reconciliation, healing, and responsibility (accountability) been taken? We used to speak of "third world nations," then it became considered more preferable and respectful to say, "developing nations." In my opinion, the most accurate term is "formerly colonized nations." Colonialism, slavery and racism (all inter-connected in my opinion) represent a system (what Foucault referred to as "power"—as manifested in institutions, practices, and structures) that show a continuing legacy of one group (based on some signifier, such as "race" or "gender" or "class" or "sexual orientation," religion, etc.) holding greater value, rights, or power. When power becomes "codified"—held by certain groups and reinforced and maintained by societal norms, beliefs, laws, and institutions, this is what we can consider "privilege."

What is power? From an NVC perspective, I would say it is the capacity to see your needs met. Privilege is a tag word for the societal practices, beliefs, and norms that both express and continue power to be held—institutionally, culturally, and socially— by some groups. As surfaced in the NVCA symposium, these layers of power can be nuanced and complex. As Roxy Manning pointed out in her session, she's aware that she has some (class) privilege by the nature of her having a higher degree (a PhD) and also faces discrimination (harder access to being seen and seeing her needs met) as a woman and a person of color. Power of course is not just structural or institutional. We also have power in terms of internal resources.

And this is a “power” that I also see NVC focused on developing.

I think if offered in a spirit of dialogue, with different members of our community having an opportunity to share observations (what they are seeing and hearing in the world- what they have experienced), and hear each other and be heard, with the focus clearly on empathy (rather than debate), that it could be a powerful and transformative moment to consider and discuss privilege, including within the NVC community. I am inspired, for example, thinking about the post-Apartheid “truth and reconciliation” process that, in effect, created a nation-wide structure for restorative justice in South Africa. As someone who has spent years researching and writing about Cultural Studies (my PhD is in this area) it is very clear to me that the processes Marshall described as effective between people for healing and reconciliation (including from profound trauma) also has broader application between groups of people and trauma and imbalances on a larger, societal scale. NVC offers a frame for understanding power and privilege and how to shift it and transform it in radical ways—through empathy, love and compassion.

I believe that specific choices/acts are connected/extend from beliefs, and patterns of beliefs, conscious or unconsciously. Maybe a more “NVC way” of referring to this is to say, “How does power and power-over function in the world today and what is the impact for us human beings?” Again, I see “power” as the capacity we have to see our needs met. How might some people be choosing strategies (and I include speech as a strategy) that may be tragic attempts to meet their needs? (I would consider actions and words of the current president of the US in relation to women to be “tragic” in the way Marshall spoke about “violence being a tragic expression of unmet needs.”)

Trainers have also expressed concern at different times about Marshall’s desire and legacy for social change. Can NVC have real impact regarding social change? Can empathy and people hearing each other create social change? I continue to believe that it can. My research in cultural studies (that examines trauma on societal and cultural levels) reinforces this belief for me that empathy can be transformative. From this perspective, discussion of power, power over, and structural and codified power (i.e. privilege) offers a way to look at, address and hear each other’s pain around our needs being met and how we choose to use our resources. This is different than using “privilege” as a moral judgment or condemnation. I also don’t think Marshall used the term “power-over” in this way either. He used “power-over” as a way to raise consciousness and awareness about particular ways that we as a species had come to behave, in ways that he did not find “life-serving” (another label he liked to use!). Overall, he asked, “How can we make life more wonderful?” (and “wonderful” is also an evaluation!). The most compelling and implicit question in all this (to my hearing) is: How am I using my power—and taking responsibility for it?

I share these thoughts with you out of a desire to see us further evolve as a species and for all life to continue to thrive on our planet. For me, this evolution of consciousness is intrinsically connected to our capacity to address the kinds of questions I raise here—even when painful and scary, and triggering. After all, it is when we are fully standing in the light that we see our shadows. And how we face our shadows will determine our future. I believe that looking at power and institutional power is one way of casting light.