

# The Zero Step:

What we do before we open our mouths influences what happens next!

With Jim Manske

*“Know what you want before you open your mouth.” -Marshall Rosenberg, developer of Nonviolent Communication*

## The Story of the Zero Step

Shortly after meeting Marshall Rosenberg in November of 2000, Jori and I started attending the Community NVC Practice Group in Albuquerque. One member of the group, Mel Schneider, offered the group a lesson he called “The Zero Step”. Mel started the presentation by writing the numbers 1 through 4 on the whiteboard:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

He then filled in the blank next to each number, enumerating the four components of NVC.

1. Observation
2. Feeling
3. Need
4. Request

He briefly reviewed what each component meant. He said something like, “Observation refers to what we see and hear. Feeling means the physical sensations and emotions we notice in our body. Needs are the universal values that cause our feelings. Requests are the action step that moves us forward into making life more wonderful.”

This was already familiar. As I once heard Marshall say, “you can learn the basic components of NVC in 5 minutes or less.”

Then he went back to the board and wrote a 0 at the top of his list:

0.

1. Observation
2. Feeling
3. Need
4. Request

And after the 0 he wrote two words

0. ZERO STEP

1. Observation
2. Feeling
3. Need
4. Request

Intrigued, we all leaned forward. I thought, “What is this? I don’t remember seeing this in Marshall’s book! He didn’t mention this at the workshop we just went to. I wonder what this is about.”

Mel explained that his understanding and practice of NVC centered around the idea that “all the rest” of NVC follows from one underlying premise: the intention that we each bring to every communication matters to the outcome! He also reminded us of the ever-present environment in which we practice NVC: the present moment.

In other words, when we take the time and energy to get clear about our intention, before communicating with one another, we increase the likelihood of living compassionately. In the moments before we engage in a conversation, the choices we make profoundly influence everyone involved. When we begin with an intention to connect, we naturally enter into the present moment, the only “time and place” that the connection we so fervently want actually exists.

### **The “Rest of NVC”**

I have come to understand that “all the rest” of NVC also supports our clarity of intention because each component of NVC awakens us to another important quality of consciousness—Openness to Outcome. Rather than pre-judging the moment based on beliefs and images rooted in the dead past or the imagined future, we open to the possibility of something new arising that can make life more wonderful from now on.

In each moment, our consciousness focuses on what is arising with four lenses:

1. What’s actually happening, right now?;
2. What feelings are arising, right now?
3. Who needs what right now?
4. What might contribute to those Needs, right now?

So the intention of NVC, in a dynamic feedback loop with NVC’s components, creates and sustains a natural quality of connection, a quality that makes compassionate giving and receiving both possible and inevitable. We creatively move through each moment of presence, awake and open to the almost infinite potential of what could be.

### **What happens if we forget the Zero Step?**

With another intention, the same four components can be used at a great cost, one that adversely affects one’s own well-being and integrity, and likely leads to something other than compassionate giving and receiving, a world based on who deserves what punishment or reward. In other words, violence rooted in separateness.

When we view the world through a screen of life-alienated “jackal”\* consciousness, we live our lives alternating between the dead past and the imaginary future. We fall into habits of:

1. Evaluation and analysis
2. Separative thinking and moral judgment
3. Resistance and addictive attachment
4. Demands and expectations

Even after we learn the basics of NVC, we may fall into these mostly unconscious habits. We may begin to use NVC as a mechanical process devoid of warmth and care. We can use the

lens of NVC to become analytical and diagnostic. We can try to use NVC to manipulate others to get what we want without regard to our interdependence. We might start judging others for not using NVC “the right way”, or correcting others for not being vulnerable enough, honest enough, empathic enough. We might become the “NVC Police” correcting others for using words that are faux feelings or when they seem to mix up needs and strategies.

“We might ask ourselves whether we are more intent on applying the process “correctly” than on connecting with the human being in front of us. Or perhaps, even though we are using the form of NVC, our only interest is in changing the other person’s behavior.” -Marshall Rosenberg

Becoming aware of any of these deeply embedded habits awakens us to the possibility of shifting our intention. Instead of an intention to **correct**, we can shift, right now, to an intention to **connect!**

### **What does living this intention look like?**

When we shift our orientation to connection in the present, it affects our body, mind and world.

For the body, the intention to connect results in heightened awareness of sensations and emotions which can be read to support us in cultivating our own vitality, ensuring that our body’s needs are met with ever-increasing reliability. We learn to listen to the body and respond compassionately to its requests.

For the mind, we experience clarity, insight and openness to outcome. The safety and security we experience in our body influences our minds to become both vulnerable and empathic. We enjoy each moment as an opportunity to sense fully the whole range of human experience with a respectful quality of allowance. The luminosity of our awareness invites self-connection in the service of life.

With body and mind in resonance, our interactions with the world shift. The separateness we have habitually felt dissolves into connection and compassion. Our willingness to both give and receive blossoms.

Now, we can connect! More and more often we can catch ourselves connecting naturally. Every time we notice a pleasant sensation in the body becomes an opportunity to taste and express gratitude. Each moment of sadness or despair invites us to inquire into the source of our pain: what need is crying, “please!” right now? Each connection to a need invites us to open to the possibility that there exists a strategy (or a myriad of strategies) to fulfill the needs arising.

### **Here are some practices to experiment with to connect with The Zero Step:**

- Acknowledge, “I am Giraffe\*”, or “I’m putting on my giraffe ears.”
- Cultivate Warmth toward self and other
- Care for your vitality as well as the vitality of other(s)
- Cultivate Gratitude
- Cultivate interest in what is alive: What’s actually happening? What feelings are arising? Who needs what right now? What might help?
- Mental practice: This refers to a strategy of using the brain’s power of simulation to practice the Zero Step in challenging situations before they happen. I sometimes do this kind of practice just before going to sleep and/or just upon awakening. If I end up in

a sleepless period in the middle of the night, one can also utilize the time for this kind of practice.

Write down one new thing that you will do to cultivate your zero step.

*\*Giraffe is the symbol of Nonviolent Communication, chosen by Marshall Rosenberg because giraffes have the strongest heart of any land mammal.*

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