

Editor's Introduction

Rachelle Lamb invites us to consider how our well being is impacted by what we choose to put at the center of our narrative regarding our needs. And how that affects whether or not we get closer to truly serving life and compassion...

Can Needs Be Harmful?

With [Rachelle Lamb](#)

Please join me in a visualization. Take a minute to imagine that you are a baby panda bear. You live in a zoo in an enclosure designed to resemble the panda bear's natural habitat in the wild. Bamboo, the mainstay of your diet, is flown in regularly for you and your panda relatives to eat. You are a few days old and every care is being given to ensure that you thrive. You are not aware of the fact, and neither are your parents, that your species is endangered. You are not aware of those who have been following your mother's pregnancy with great interest .. nor that the news of your birth has spread around the world. In fact you're on You Tube.

I have a question for you baby panda bear .. as good as things appear to be and as much as you appear to be thriving, how much do you think you will ever be able to live your life as an authentic panda bear? How much do you think you will ever know of what it means to live naturally?

This question might at first appear to be irrelevant to the subject at hand but I ask it because it leads to another question: how do *WE* know that we are living as authentic humans? How much do *WE* know of what it means to live naturally?

I present this panda bear scenario because when we speak about our needs in the context of the Nonviolent Communication process, whether we wish to acknowledge it or not, we can only really speak of needs from our subjective lens of understanding, a lens which typically doesn't hold an aperture beyond that understanding.

Because Marshall Rosenberg was so committed to social change (which was what drew me to him almost 20 years ago), and because he so regularly spoke about the importance of questioning the social structures in which our lives are embedded, I find it important to begin any exploration of needs, mine or others, with the understanding that I am not so different from that panda bear and that most of my thoughts and actions occur within the confines of thought and understanding generated by the dominant culture in which I live that has been so foundational to me whether I have agreed with its ideologies and strategies or not. I have

accordingly been taught to perceive the world in a certain way, which in large part dictates what I see and how I respond to what I see.

In other words I want to acknowledge that the dominant western culture in which I live has had its way with me. As a consequence, I must cultivate to the extent that I can, a hyper level of awareness and discernment (both which have been compromised by virtue of my immersion in the culture) in order to increase the likelihood that I can understand and relate to needs in a way that is ultimately life- serving. I need to entertain the very real possibility that the indoctrination I have been subjected to might be so profound, so thorough, and so persuasive that I don't have a solid grasp of the landscape of needs beyond the relentless propaganda of western thought and orientation.

I wonder .. can I effectively develop the capacity to **connect to needs in their vast breadth and reach**? Do I understand needs beyond the **human-centric orientation that is so commonly sold to me** without any warnings vis-à-vis the implications of that orientation? Am I able to subvert the dominating pervasive human-centric orientation of all that enters my newsfeed so that my thinking and actions have a greater chance at truly serving and supporting life rather than aligning with the current regime?

Rather than seeing this line of questioning as a condemnation of myself or of western culture and then getting defensive about it, I find it much more fruitful to learn to examine my reactivity and forge a different way of responding. I don't deny that it's threatening to become curious about my culturally derived understanding of things because so much rests on the narrative that I have embraced for so much of my life. There is no doubt that to question it is to subject myself to the necessity of rethinking pretty much everything I have come to know and believe. It's not comfortable.

I'm not sure however that our species has the luxury of any other way of responding to the many crises that continue to present themselves and demand more of our attention.

We would do well to heed the words of the English-American poet W. H. Auden who wrote in *The Age of Anxiety*:

*We would rather be ruined than changed
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.*

At this point I am willing to be changed. I am willing to climb the cross of the moment and let my illusions die.

I am willing to ask the question *what does life need* and to then trust that the answer to that question will be one that also includes my well-being. I am also willing to **consider the possibility that what I mean when I speak of my well-being is far different than what our living planet can sustainably deliver**. I suspect that the level of comfort to which I have

become so accustomed and have until only recently, come to view as a nonnegotiable human "right", exceeds the capacity of the planet to bestow upon its 7.6 billion human inhabitants.

If our Mother Earth took a look at our list of NVC needs, I imagine there are a few she might add. There are two that immediately jump to mind however: **REVERENCE** and **AWARENESS OF ENOUGH**.

Let's return to the panda bears. If a panda bear has been removed from its natural environment and has its "panda-ness" accordingly compromised, then it stands to reason that a human removed from its natural environment also has its "human-ness" compromised. In his book *Nonviolent Communication*, Marshall Rosenberg writes on page 1 that he was preoccupied most of his 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?***

Asking hard questions is never easy. It's not meant to be. Here is what I have noticed when making challenging questions central to any workshop or private coaching session. I've noticed that doing so almost instantly changes the tone and urgency of the grievances that have prompted people to seek me out in the first place. It softens the edges of certainty about how the world is and how it "should" accordingly respond to us. It increases people's humility and grants a proper place at the table for grief and bewilderment.

Before trying to solve our personal or collective problems we might be well served to first ask: How has my enculturation compromised my understanding of what my/our needs are? How has my enculturation compromised my understanding of what it means to serve and enrich life?

Only after asking and living inside these questions which begin to acknowledge the "unnatural" and often insane conditions in which we live and conduct our lives can we then more effectively and compassionately begin to answer questions related to how we engage with others: How do I better relate to my spouse, lover, friend, parent, child, colleague, etc?

Too often we use **the term "life-serving" and "life-enriching" to describe desires and outcomes what would work for us personally**. Our lens is pretty self-centric and when it extends to others, it's an improvement but it remains primarily human-centric. I think it's important for us to ask ourselves ***for whom or for what would this ultimately be life-enriching?*** If my answer only goes as far as satisfying my own needs or the needs of my fellow humans without considering **what life needs in order to keep our human project afloat**, then I'm deluded into believing that my own personal well-being is what determines the well-being of what sustains me, when in fact it is the health of the earth and the health of human culture that sustains me.

I developed a social change questionnaire earlier this year. The final question is:

*Think of a time today or in the last several days when your needs were satisfied. Consider the **cost associated with satisfying those needs** and how their fulfilment has possibly **generated unmet needs elsewhere in the world that you may not immediately be aware of** and that likely don't accrue directly to you. What does it do to you to know this?*

Can needs be harmful? Yes and no. If our framework for understanding needs is primarily human-centric, then yes, harm is almost inevitable as testified by the devastation that our western consumption oriented lifestyles have on the planet in its efforts to satisfy needs. A human-centric orientation places **humans in the centre** where they don't rightfully belong. Life is what belongs in the centre. And **when needs are life-centric**, our decisions are much more likely to be weighted in the direction of what constitutes **enough so that life can go on**.

I was born in 1957, a time where everything was considered possible. It still is pretty much. The self-help industry is thriving as people enroll for instruction on how to master living their lives to the fullest, land their dream job, find their dream partner and purchase their dream home. It's pretty seductive, highly promoted and yet **rarely examined in the light of associated costs** to the planet and to our obligation to deep citizenship and **kinship with life and each other**. The momentum of *wanting and having more* has only gained momentum and it's hard on the planet and equally hard on our souls and relationships.

Leonard Cohen summed it up well when he said, *"What is the appropriate behaviour for a man or a woman in the midst of this world, where each person is clinging to his piece of debris? What's the proper salutation between people as they pass each other in this flood?"* Our relationships do not unfold in isolation of the socio-cultural and environmental landscapes that lay claim to us. They are deeply informed by them. They are either nurtured or starved by them. **It's important to know this as we attempt to address our personal or social woes when connecting to needs.**

Can needs be harmful? It's a good thing to wonder.

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 skillfully 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.

