



'Did ya hear about some workshop going on this weekend?'

'Violent offenders' demonstrate their capacity for nonviolence

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SUMMARY

In this article, we describe how two men, one inside prison and the other back in the community, used nonviolent communication to achieve positive outcomes in situations that might otherwise have escalated into damaging confrontations.

Introduction

'Did ya hear about some workshop going on this weekend, where if you say 'fuck you', they translate it into a bunch of feelings and needs?'

This prison yard conversation referred to a workshop that was part of 'The Freedom Project', currently running in two US prisons, for the benefit of prisoners, returnees to the community and their families. The principle tool used by the project facilitators is a process called 'Nonviolent Communication' (NVC). Inmates learn specific transferable skills that enable them to transform their responses to fellow inmates and prison staff and that they later use to help themselves survive outside. Their numerous testimonials evidence a move away from their stated habitual strategy of using violence to keep themselves safe; for example:

'NVC teaches you how to recognize anger before it becomes violence and to understand, deal with and take control of the rage you may feel.'

'I now have the means to meet my needs appropriately, at the same time as respecting the needs of others ... it greatly enhanced my ability to return to society in a more effective way.'

We (the authors) are working towards introducing NVC into prisons in the UK in the expectation of similar results here.

For this article, we have chosen two incidents that for us, powerfully illustrate some of the possibilities. We draw on verbatim material to illustrate the impact of NVC on men in two different situations, one outside and one inside prison, and use their stories to describe the NVC process.

Walter's story (from outside prison)

Walter, now aged 49, has been imprisoned for sex offences for twenty of the last twenty two years of his life. His childhood was punctuated by brutal beatings by his step mother. This led him to believe that the only way to protect himself in this world was "to be more hardened, violent and cunning than the next person". In 1998, he lost the sight of one eye in what he describes a "prison yard physical confrontation".

Since then, he has attended five two-day NVC workshops, three in prison, two outside, as well as participating in a support group.

On his release in February 2001, he faced many challenges. He was a black American in a very white community. He was classified as a level three sex offender – the category of prisoner thought most likely to re-offend. He was refused a room in safe and supportive accommodation because of his past, and ended up living where he had previously been known as a drug dealer.

Then came his biggest challenge: the local paper carried a statement, allegedly made by Walter to the police, saying that he was going to re-offend on the riverside trail where he went for his daily run. The paper described the community as being concerned for its safety. Walter felt anger and despair at the injustice, particularly when he saw his picture displayed in public places. He was also worried at the thought of losing one of his strategies for keeping healthy and sane.

However, instead of reacting violently, as he would have done earlier in his life, Walter chose to use his NVC tools.

The dialogue below is Walter's account of his own particular personal struggle. He describes it as his internal 'Giraffe' listening to his internal 'Jackal'. Through this process, he is able to see a nonviolent way forward. (In NVC, the term 'Giraffe', chosen because the giraffe is the largest hearted land mammal, describes that consciousness characterized by empathic and heartfelt connection. The term 'Jackal' describes the consciousness that prevents us from being in touch with ourselves and others, leading to communication that is characterized by blame, judgment and criticism.)

Jackal: See, I told your stupid ass these rednecks were not going to give you a fair shot. That fat ass detective bitch twisted everything you said and even threw in some shot! No one even knew who you were, so how could they be concerned about you being on the river front trail? Yeah, that bitch that was running all that shit at you. I told you that something was going on but no: you had your Mr Goody Two Shoes on, you damn sucker. Now those white bastards got your black ass photo posted all over the fucking place, so don't be shocked at your fate now. Yeah, they been looking to lynch a nigger and your stupid ass done served yourself up on a platter. So where is all your friends now, asshole? This changed you is gonna wind up getting us killed. You've got to fight fire with fire. Fuck it, if you have to go back to prison, or if these white motherfuckers want to get nasty; we can hold court right out here on the streets. You've got money to get you a dope sack and let them see what a real nigger can do to this hick ass town. You can make more money in a day than you make lifting up them damn apple boxes. Fuck the square game: it's not you!

Giraffe: So are you feeling afraid because you think some white people here will use this new information concerning you to further reject you?

Jackal: Oh, here we go with this shit! Yeah, well I tell you what nigger: you better wake the fuck up and recognize!

Giraffe: Are you feeling disappointed because you are needing acceptance and to be understood?

Jackal: You know damn well that's what I need and you also know damn well that these peckerwoods look at you and all they really see is your horrible past. They don't know the pain that you have encountered. She beat you unmercifully. You went to school with your nerves hanging out of your teeth when she broke your teeth with the broomstick. You lied then at six years old and told the teacher you fell out of a tree, but they knew. That was a good day!

Giraffe: Are you feeling misunderstood and hurt because you are needing to be appreciated for where you are now?

Jackal: Yeah, I have worked my ass off once I understood that I was treating all women according to how I perceived myself being treated by her when I was a child.

Giraffe: So you are needing support for your ongoing efforts to continue the work you have been doing to make a positive change.

Jackal: Yeah, and all this work ain't changed nothing. People don't honestly accept me

Giraffe: Are you feeling frightened because you are needing reassurance and safety?

Jackal: Hell, yes. You seen that guy taking pictures of us yesterday. Suppose he belongs to one of those hate groups. Shit, you couldn't even sleep last night; every time somebody walked by your door, you bolted straight up.

Giraffe: I know it is scary to be vulnerable. I know it sometimes seems as if the whole deck is stacked against you. But just look at how far we've come. You know all those people at those recovery support circles like you. You already told them about your past and they still accept you.

Jackal: Well, most of them do, but some of them look at me funny too.

Giraffe: Well, you know you are a little stand-offish yourself; you think that may confuse people sometimes.

Jackal: Well, I have to admit that life is a lot easier now but shit, it hurts always being reminded of my past mistakes.

Giraffe: But it hurts more when we keep repeating those mistakes and that's what scares people and allows us to be disconnected. And you know how much we enjoy being connected.

Jackal: Yeah, I guess it will take time for people to really know me. I suppose anyone in their right mind would be somewhat hesitant to trust me based on my track record.

Giraffe: It is amazing, though, some people already have opened their hearts to us, willing to give us an opportunity to blossom.

Jackal: Yeah, we just need to keep building on that.

Internal conversations like these enabled Walter to move from focusing on his own pain and anger to seeing instead what he might be triggering

in others. Moving to this different awareness enabled him to take constructive action. He continued to run along the river front but each time he did so, he would call the police to let them know he was going. In recognition of the community's need for safety, he also took other people with him. Later, he received letters from people in the community apologizing for the way they had treated him.

Rusty's story (from inside prison)

In February 2001, Rusty was being held in a minimum security unit. When there was an increase in escape attempts at the unit, the decision was taken to transfer all violent offenders. Rusty was still classified as a 'violent offender' and therefore on the list to be transferred. He requested an interview with the custody staff.

During the interview, he describes the three staff as speaking to him as though he was on trial all over again:

'They grilled me: I felt my pulse begin to race, my face reddened, and my body started trembling. I realized I had clear physical signs that I had my Jackal ears instead of my Giraffe ears on. I remember thoughts like: 'They can't talk to me this way. They should be more sensitive towards me because I don't make trouble for them'.

Once he had understood why his body was reacting "with anger and defensiveness", he was able to give himself some silent empathy:

'I am feeling very frustrated right now because I am needing some understanding. Further, I want to be seen for the person I am today.'

He was then ready to listen to the staff's feelings and needs.

When they said:

'You are a very dangerous person and we are not going to keep you here with this kind of criminal record'

he heard it as their concern for the safety and security of the community, rather than as labels and evaluations of himself. With this awareness, he responded with:

'I hear you are very concerned with the safety and security of the community.'

They replied:

'Yes, we are, and we are not going to risk our jobs for someone we can't trust. Just look at your history. Would you stick your neck out if you were us?'

He was able to stay with Giraffe awareness and respond:

'When I think of my criminal history, I can understand why my request would be difficult. Are you wanting some reassurance that I will put neither your job nor the community at risk?'

The staff continued to remind Rusty of his past behaviours. He continued to empathize with their concerns, finally meeting their need for reassurance that he would not be a problem. In the end they agreed to let him stay, on condition that he continued participating in and assisting with the Nonviolent Communication programme.

What is the NVC process?

The purpose of NVC is to strengthen our ability to inspire compassion from others and to respond compassionately to others and to ourselves.

It is based on these principles:

- *we are all trying to get our needs met;*
- *we fare better if we get these needs met co-operatively rather than aggressively*
- *our feelings tell us whether our needs are being met (we may feel joy, excitement ...), or not (in which case we may feel fury, sadness, frustration...).*

It also gives us a framework for expressing ourselves and hearing others by focusing our attention on four steps:

- *what we are observing, expressed without evaluation or judgment;*
- *what we are feeling in relation to what we observe;*
- *what met or unmet needs lay behind those feelings and*
- *the requests we would like to make in order to stay connected with ourselves or others, or to meet our needs.*

When Walter, for example, asks himself the question:

'Are you feeling frightened because you are needing reassurance and safety?'

he is showing awareness of his feelings and needs. He has also moved away from blaming others for his pain. His use of the words 'because you are needing ...' indicates his understanding that his feelings are triggered by his own unmet needs rather than being caused by other people's actions.

Walter is empathizing with himself. Rusty, in a face to face situation, empathizes first with himself and then with the prison staff:

'I hear you are very concerned with the safety and security of the community.'

These two stories also contain examples of jackal consciousness:

- **labels:** "These rednecks..."
- **judgments:** "That fat ass detective bitch twisted everything you said..."
- **injunctives:** "You've got to fight fire with fire .."; "They should be more sensitive towards me."
- **Blame:** "Your stupid ass done served yourself up on a platter" (sic)

In practice, not all the four steps may be articulated: for example, observations may be self evident from the context. However, the two fundamental principles of NVC, which are

- *to connect empathically and*
- *to maintain one's attention in the present*

shine through in both stories. Walter and Rusty show how they now acknowledge the self defeating nature of violent, short term survival tactics, and have embraced sustainable ways of meeting their own needs at the same time as recognizing and respecting the needs of others.

Summary of the NVC Process, using an imaginary conversation between Walter and a community representative	
Observation	<i>When I read your words in the paper ...</i> This is a neutral statement of the situation that triggered a feeling.
Feelings	<i>... I felt concerned ...</i> This is an expression of feeling in relation to the observation.
Needs	<i>... because I need support and understanding from the community where I live. I also need exercise as part of my re-integration programme.</i> These are the needs connected to the feeling that has been identified.
Requests	<i>Would you tell me if it would meet your needs for safety if I let the police know when I am going jogging along the towpath?</i> This is a request for something specific that can be acted upon immediately.

Conclusion

Rusty and Walter's experiences are not unique. In the words of another prisoner:

'I am a very real living example of what can happen to a person who chooses to communicate with violence and the cost of that choice. I wonder where I would be today if I had heard your message 30 years ago?'

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First published in The Prison Service Journal, March 2002. (with modifications to Walter's colourful language). Reproduced here by permission of the editor.

We very much appreciate the contributions of Lucy Leu, Mark Goodman, Maylin Harnden Fisher, Walter Armstrong and Rusty Thomas: we could not have written this article without them.
