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# Restorative Resolutions: Compassionate Communication in Practice

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A Nonviolent Communication Professional Development Training



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A Nonviolent Communication Training for Personal and Professional Development

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## Compassionate Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a conflict resolution and empathy development process espoused by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg (Rosenberg 2000). Rosenberg, a student and colleague of Carl Rogers, developed this process while working with children who have disabilities, training teachers to integrate children with disabilities in classrooms, successfully facilitating racial integration in Southern US schools during the 1970s, and mediating gang conflict in Chicago and internationally. NVC draws on Rosenberg's involvement with the Civil Rights movement of the 60's, 70's and 80's in the United States. It distills the Compassionate Nonviolence principles of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, applying them to intra-personal, interpersonal, and systemic levels of communication. It has been called a practical language of Restorative Justice. The heart of NVC focuses on the needs/ values that activate feelings and inspire behaviour.

NVC is an approach to communication and being in relationship that emphasizes the development of assertive honest autonomy, alongside responsive compassionate interdependence. For Rosenberg, this balance between autonomy and interdependence is central to healthy individual psychology, mutually respectful communities, and a healthy participatory democracy (Rosenberg, 1972).

## Partnership Paradigm

*“If you are coming to help me, you are wasting your time.  
But if you are coming because your liberation is bound up with mine,  
then let us work together.”* (Lilla Watson, Indigenous Australian, Murri Elder)

The term Partnership Paradigm refers to ways of organizing society, institutions, and relationships rooted in mutual respect and mutual benefit for people and planet, rather than fear-based domination, oppression, and exploitation of people and planet. There are diverse ways of achieving this, and these ways of being community have been exercised to varying degrees at various points in history all over the world going back to the origins of our species and continuing today. It is a story of human potential new to Western archeology and anthropology, but familiar to diverse long-standing and contemporary Indigenous sciences and philosophies (Blackstock, 2011; Borrows, 2016; Clark, 2002; Eisler, 2000; Gimbutas, 1982; Rifkin, 2009; Smith, 1999; Simpson, 2008; van der Velden, 2018).

*“We have alternatives. We can organize relations in ways that reward violence and domination. Or, as some of our earliest art suggests, we can recognize our essential interconnection with one another and the rest of the living world. We can construct social relations based primarily on hierarchies of domination backed by fear - and, ultimately, force. Or, we can construct hierarchies of actualization, in which power is used not to control others but to enable others to realize their highest human potentials. When this happens, all in society benefit”* (Eisler, 2000, p.91)

Drawing on decades of cultural and gender dynamics research, Dr. Riane Eisler argues persuasively in her books that a partnership paradigm is essential for human life to flourish. Dr. Nel Noddings, professor of Philosophy and Education at Columbia University and recognized for her contributions to education theory and practice, supports Eisler’s claim. Noddings is most closely identified with the “Ethics of Care” as it relates to schooling, social welfare, and the life of communities. Susan Skye, a UCLA dean and colleague of Eisler’s from the 1970’s, collaborated in developing Partnership Paradigm concepts. Skye, a senior trainer with the international Center for Nonviolent Communication, is recognized for identifying and integrating the links between partnership concepts, ethics of care, and the Nonviolent Communication process.

**These concepts of “Partnership Paradigm” and “Ethics of Care” have been hailed by many, including renowned Princeton anthropologist Ashley Montagu, as the most important writing since Darwin penned The Origin of Species.**

While the concept of Partnership Paradigm may still be considered a radical breakthrough within Western European and colonial Settler research and understanding of humanity, we must acknowledge and respect that variations on this concept have been highly developed in a wide range of ways for millennia. Renowned Anishinaabe scholars Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Dr. John Borrows (Faculty of Law, University of Victoria BC), alongside highly respected Gitksan scholar and civil rights advocate Dr. Cindy Blackstock (Faculty of Social Work, McGill University QC, and Executive Director for First Nations Child & Family Caring Society) each demonstrate in their writing that Indigenous nations in North America have maintained (and continue to maintain) well established applied schools of ethics and philosophy, systems of education, legal practices, diplomatic relations,

and political structures, balancing individual needs with collective needs, including sustainability treaties with each other and the non-human world. (Blackstock, 2011; Borrows, 2016; Simpson, 2008).

These are approaches that, despite profound linguistic/ cultural diversity between First Nations, and despite the impacts of colonialism, strive towards dynamic, reciprocal, responsive, relationship-based practices such as: humility, honesty, respect, courage, wisdom, truth, and love. This example comes from the Anishinaabe philosophy and practice called The Seven Grandfather Teachings, outlining necessities for communities to survive and thrive (Borrows, 2016; Bouchard & Tehanakerewkwen, 2009). These kinds of philosophies foster and enact a comprehensive partnership paradigm within a broad range of cultural contexts.

Relational, partnership approaches to mutual-responsibility, mutual benefit, and navigating conflict, ultimately facilitate freedom, and peaceful coexistence (Eisler, 2000).

*“We are all familiar with [the partnership and dominator] models from our own lives. We know the pain, fear, and tension of relations based on domination and submission, on coercion and accommodation, of jockeying for control, of trying to manipulate and cajole when we are unable to express our real feelings and needs, of the miserable, awkward tug of war for that illusory moment of power rather than powerlessness, of our unfulfilled yearning for caring and mutuality, of all the misery, suffering, and lost lives and potentials that come from these kinds of relations. Most of us have also, at least intermittently, experienced another way of being. One where we feel safe and seen for who we truly are, where our essential humanity and that of others shines through... lifting our hearts and spirits, enfolding us in a sense that the world can after all be right, that we are valued and valuable.”* (Eisler, 2000, p. xiv)

#### **More information:**

- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson <https://www.leannesimpson.ca/>
- Cindy Blackstock “Breath of Life Theory” [http://indigenoulanguagelearning.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Blackstock-C\\_2011\\_The-emergence-of-breath-of-life-theory.pdf](http://indigenoulanguagelearning.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Blackstock-C_2011_The-emergence-of-breath-of-life-theory.pdf)
- John Borrows <https://www.uvic.ca/law/facultystaff/facultydirectory/borrows.php>  
Explaining Anishinaabe Law <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=sNuityiUXV0>  
Indigenous Law lectures [https://m.youtube.com/channel/UC3GVqsk\\_81azYxiGda4j6iQ/feed](https://m.youtube.com/channel/UC3GVqsk_81azYxiGda4j6iQ/feed)
- Mary Clark “In Search of Human Nature” <https://www.routledge.com/In-Search-of-Human-Nature-1st-Edition/Clark/p/book/9780203987131>
- Riane Eisler “Partnership Paradigm” [www.partnershipway.org](http://www.partnershipway.org)
- Nel Noddings “Ethic of Care” <http://www.tc.edu/abouttc/faculty.htm>
- Jeremy Rifkin “The Empathic Civilization” <https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/rsa-animate/2010/05/rsa-animate---the-empathic-civilisation>
- Susan Skye “Nonviolent Communication” <https://newdepths.org/>
- David Bouchard & Joseph Martin Tehanakerewkwen “Seven Grandfather Teachings” [http://www.btgwinnipeg.ca/uploads/5/2/4/1/52412159/the\\_seven\\_sacred\\_teachings\\_.pdf](http://www.btgwinnipeg.ca/uploads/5/2/4/1/52412159/the_seven_sacred_teachings_.pdf)

## Paradigms of Engagement

**Table 1: Paradigms of Engagement (adapted from Skye, 2004)**

<b>Dominator Paradigm</b>	<b>Partnership Paradigm</b>
<b>Zero-sum game:</b> Win/lose or lose/lose	<b>Mutual consideration:</b> Win/win
<b>Dependence or independence:</b> Abandoning personal power, or exerting personal power at the expense of others, (over-identification with one or both)	<b>Interdependence:</b> Acts from authentic self-empowerment, in concert with others, honouring both community needs and individual needs (comfortable in own skin and confident sharing power)
Values <b>conceptual abstract systems</b> over all other systems.	Values <b>integrated systems</b> , conceptual abstract & practical applied, logical & intuitive, quantitative positivist & qualitative interpretive...
<b>Personal &amp; social focus on scarcity:</b> Scarcity, pain & deficiencies (fear of/ avoidance of/ diagnosis of/ prevention of/ amelioration of)	<b>Personal &amp; social focus on abundance:</b> Abundance, vitality & strengths (acknowledging/ fostering/ expanding/ facilitating/ inspiring/ inviting)
<b>Motivation:</b> Driven by punishment/ reward, coercion, and duty/ obligation	<b>Motivation:</b> Inspired by free choice, joyful giving, desire to contribute, mutual respect & mutual consideration
<b>Needs are located extrinsically:</b> External validation, self-perception based in labels and judgments, respect is maintained by structures and demands, creativity is modulated by external approval, and preferred strategies are rigidly adhered to.	<b>Needs are located intrinsically:</b> Self-respect, spontaneous creativity, clear sense of self in context with community, integrity between values and actions, respect is developed through mutual consideration, and preferred strategies are held passionately but lightly
<b>Punitive Force: Retributive Justice</b> Purpose – to deter unwanted behaviour via labels, exclusion, public shame, and punishment; to meet community needs for safety, order, and justice at any expense without regard for social/ emotional harm; violence (punishment) used to control violence.	<b>Protective Force: Restorative Justice</b> Purpose – to safeguard the needs of all concerned through shared accountability and understanding; to develop strategies that support well-being for individuals and the community; when violence occurs, establishing safety through the minimal force necessary and applying resources for social/ emotional healing & harmony; Restorative Practices used to increase belonging and deter violence.

## A Capacity-Building Model

(Excerpted from Little, 2008)

Unpublished studies initiated by schools in Yugoslavia (through UNICEF), Italy, Israel, Sweden, Canada, and the USA, report significant improvements in well-being and school climate for both teachers and students as a result of Nonviolent Communication trainings (Center for Nonviolent Communication, 2007). Several unpublished school reports and articles in practitioner journals also attest to the positive impacts reported by training participants, particularly in schools (CNVC 2007; Hart & Göthlin, 2002; Kashtan, 2002; Kelly, 2002; Ronnstrom, 2002). An evaluation of Nonviolent Communication training at Gustav Vasa School in Stockholm, Sweden, notes that:

*“Many teachers reported that they now listen with more attention to students and parents, and they also listen with an increased ability to understand feelings, needs, and requests that are not always clearly expressed; some teachers reported being less defensive in their communication with students, colleagues, and parents; ... teachers emphasized an overall change in attitude...to students and/or to themselves. An empathic attitude was more and more alive; some teachers emphasized their increased ability to manage conflicts as most valuable... Increased clarity in conversations and improved listening skills were cited as the most positive effects from the trainings.” (Ronnstrom, 2002)*

According to these reports several impacts are repeatedly linked to Nonviolent Communication training. These include: clearer self-expression, increased ease managing conflicts, empathic listening to oneself as well as others, an enriched ability to understand others, increased personal responsibility, a greater sense of safety in difficult conversations, decreased stress, improved confidence advocating for one’s own needs and helping others, and a more positive experience of the social climate.

Rosenberg (2000) specifies that when individuals clarify what they observe, feel, and need, instead of judging or diagnosing, they develop a capacity for honest expression that invites the compassion of others. Further, he asserts that when individuals focus on common human feelings and needs, rather than on the angry or critical words of others, they tend to discover an increased depth of compassion and capacity to listen. Through its emphasis on deep listening – to oneself and others – Nonviolent Communication fosters increased attentiveness, mutual respect and empathy with an increased desire to give from the heart. Rosenberg calls the form simple, yet powerfully transformative.

*\*N.B. My own Masters thesis research (Little, 2008) and two subsequent team research projects in middle schools (pending publication) parallel the findings listed above.*

## Outline of Nonviolent Communication

*Focus: Developing social skills intended to communicate mutual respect, honesty, and compassion towards oneself as well as others – engaging restorative justice principles and partnership paradigm.*

The Nonviolent Communication model (Rosenberg, 2000) is based on two parts, honesty and empathy.

**1. HONESTY:**        **Observations** distinct from evaluation;  
                           **Feelings** distinct from thoughts;  
                           **Needs** distinct from strategies; and  
                           **Requests** distinct from demands

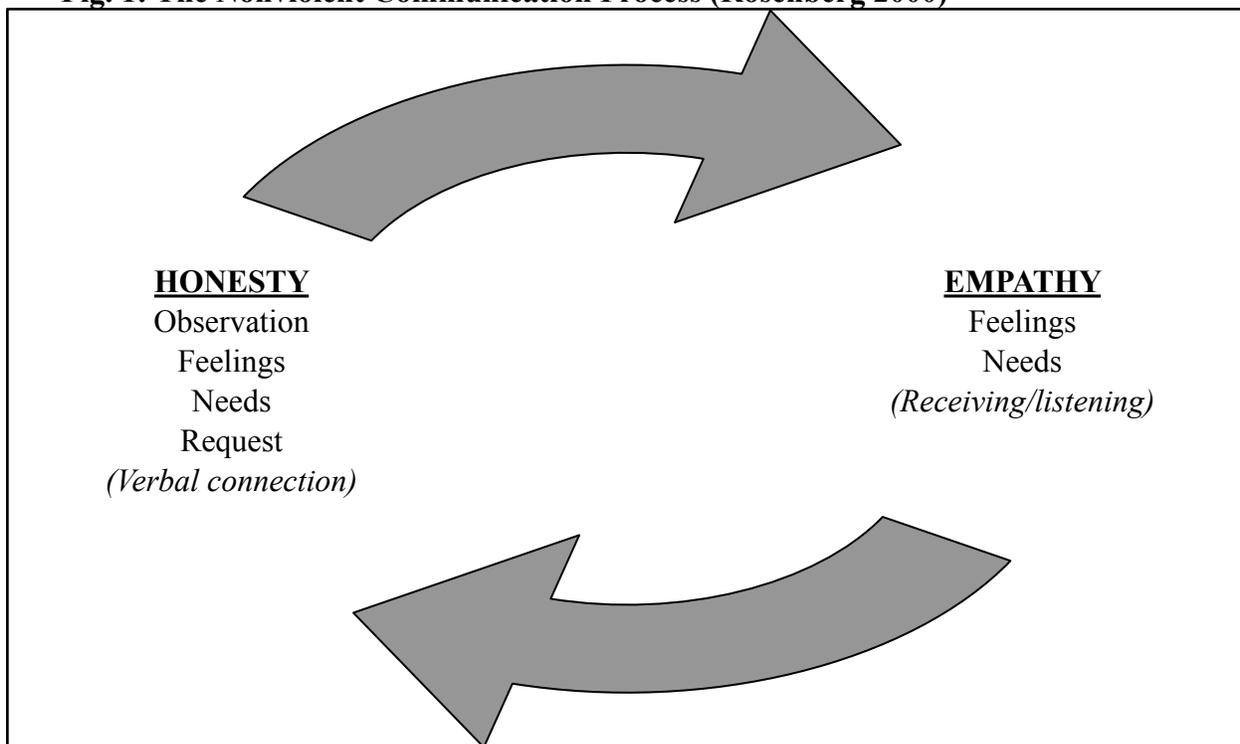
*“When I see/hear \_\_\_\_\_, I feel \_\_\_\_\_, because I need \_\_\_\_\_. Would you \_\_\_\_\_?”*

**2. EMPATHY:**        for the **Feelings** and **Needs** of others, and for oneself.

*“Are you feeling \_\_\_\_\_ because you need \_\_\_\_\_?” (empathy towards another)*

*“Am I feeling \_\_\_\_\_ because I need \_\_\_\_\_?” (empathy towards self)*

**Fig. 1: The Nonviolent Communication Process (Rosenberg 2000)**



This interplay between honesty and empathy supports:

- Resolving conflict with more ease, diffusing tension, and preventing violence;
- Taking responsibility for one’s own thoughts, feelings, needs, & actions;
- Expressing appreciation & regret in ways that build mutual-respect.
- Self-regulation and self-soothing during tense situations

## Observations

*“The highest form of human intelligence is the ability to observe without evaluating.”*

J. Krishnamurti

### Observations:

- Describe circumstances, events, or behaviours specifically in terms of sensory perceptions (ex. like a photograph or audio recording).
- Describe concretely what I notice that *stimulates* my feelings.
- Separate from my evaluations and assessments of the circumstance, event, or behaviour that I am observing.

While evaluations and assessments can be important for making sense of the world, they do not generally contribute to compassionate connection. When we mix observation with evaluation, we increase the likelihood that the other person will hear criticism and resist what is being said. If we pay careful attention, it is possible to avoid language that clouds observations. Compassionate connection is supported by conscious awareness of the distinction between observation and evaluation.

**Table 2: Evaluation and observation (adapted from Krayenhoff, 2004)**

<b>Evaluation</b>	<b>Observation</b>
<b>Permanent or pervasive generalizations:</b> – You <i>never/ always/ seldom</i> ...etc.	– Twice last week... – The last three times I asked you ... – On Friday, ...
<b>Evaluative verbs:</b> – He procrastinates. – She excels. – He worries.	<b>Observation</b> – He first opened his notes the night before the exam. – She completed her project 1 day ahead of schedule. – He said he “didn’t know if he had enough cash.”
<b>Disowned judgment &amp; labeling:</b> – That dog <i>is</i> ugly. – You <i>are</i> irresponsible. – He <i>is</i> so talented and amazing.	<b>Observation</b> – That dog has no fur and two different ears. – You didn’t take the garbage out today. – He builds furniture by hand.
<b>A conclusive prediction:</b> – You’ll be sorry if you... – You’ll get sick if you...	<b>Observation</b> – The car pool has agreed to leave at 4:30pm sharp. – You went to bed at 3am and skipped breakfast.
<b>Claiming supreme perspective:</b> – He won’t make it in the real world. – That’s impossible. – 2 months, and the world is her oyster!	<b>Observation</b> – He has lost his files for the third time. – I have a hard time imagining that. – She’s been hired in her field starting Monday

## Feelings

***“Our needs are continuously being met, or are going unmet, and our feelings are a direct response to the state of our needs”*** (Lamb, 2005)

It can be difficult to distinguish between thoughts and feelings. Feelings describe an emotional or physical sensory state that we experience independent of other people. Our feelings are indicators about the state of our needs rather than reflections on the behaviour of others. We can experience the full range of human emotions whether we are alone or in the company of others.

Nonviolent Communication trainer Rachele Lamb (2005) specifies that some words expressing interpretations of others’ actions are often confused with feelings. They often describe what we think others are doing to us. These include:

Abandoned	Abused	Attacked	Belittled	Betrayed
Boxed-in	Bullied	Cheated	Coerced	Controlled
Cornered	Criticized	Diminished	Distrusted	Ignored
Insulted	Interrupted	Intimidated	Invalidated	Let down
Manipulated	Misunderstood	Neglected	Overworked	Patronized
Pressured	Provoked	Put down	Rejected	Ripped-off
Taken for granted	Threatened	Tricked	Unheard	Unseen
Unappreciated	Unsupported	Unwanted	Used	Victimized
Violated	Wronged			

### For example:

I might say, “I feel ignored.”

- But really, I OBSERVE that the other person has turned away from me and is silent.
- I might interpret/ evaluate that as ignoring behaviour  
This may be an accurate interpretation, but it’s not a feeling because:
- If I think I am being ignored *when I need attention*, I might FEEL sad.
- If I think I am being ignored *when I need rest*, then I might FEEL relief.

Either way, I am interpreting the behaviour I see as “ignoring.” This is a THOUGHT, an evaluation, of someone’s behaviour towards me. It might be accurate, but it is not a feeling.

Rosenberg (2000) clarifies that, usually, a thought is really being expressed in English when the word “feel” is immediately followed by:

- a) **that, like, as if:** “I feel *that* you should know better”; “I feel *like* a failure” (THOUGHT)
- b) pronouns (**I, you, he, she, they, it**): “I feel *it* is useless”; “I feel *I am* being used” (THOUGHT)
- c) names or nouns referring to specific people: “I feel *Amy* is responsible”; “I feel *my boss* is being manipulative” (THOUGHT)

Words that refer to specific emotional or physical states increase clarity and connection with others. Avoid vague, general terms (ex: fine, good, bad, alright) when clarity and connection are important. Inventories of some specific feelings follow on the next pages.

## Feelings When Needs Are Satisfied

**Table 3: Feelings Inventory**

<p><b>AFFECTIONATE</b>            compassionate            friendly            loving            open hearted            sympathetic            tender            warm</p> <p><b>CONFIDENT</b>            open            proud            safe            secure</p> <p><b>ENGAGED</b>            absorbed            alert            curious            engrossed            enchanted            entranced            fascinated            interested            intrigued            involved            spellbound            stimulated</p> <p><b>INSPIRED</b>            amazed            awed            wonder</p>	<p><b>EXCITED</b>            amazed            animated            ardent            aroused            astonished            dazzled            eager            energetic            enthusiastic            giddy            invigorated            lively            passionate            surprised            vibrant</p> <p><b>EXHILARATED</b>            blissful            ecstatic            elated            enthralled            exuberant            radiant            rapturous            thrilled</p> <p><b>GRATEFUL</b>            appreciative            moved            thankful            touched</p> <p><b>HOPEFUL</b>            expectant            encouraged            optimistic</p>	<p><b>JOYFUL</b>            amused            delighted            glad            happy            jubilant            pleased            tickled</p> <p><b>PEACEFUL</b>            calm            clear headed            comfortable            centered            content            equanimity            fulfilled            mellow            quiet            relaxed            relieved            satisfied            serene            still            tranquil            trusting</p> <p><b>REFRESHED</b>            enlivened            rejuvenated            renewed            rested            restored            revived</p>
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## Feelings When Needs Are Not Satisfied

**Table 4: Feelings Inventory**

<p><b>AFRAID</b> apprehensive dread foreboding frightened panicked scared suspicious terrified wary worried</p> <p><b>ANNOYED</b> aggravated dismayed disgruntled displeased exasperated frustrated impatient irritated irked</p> <p><b>ANGRY*</b> enraged furious indignant irate livid outraged resentful</p> <p><b>AVERSION*</b> animosity appalled disgusted dislike hate horrified hostile repulsed</p>	<p><b>CONFUSED</b> ambivalent baffled bewildered dazed hesitant mystified perplexed puzzled torn</p> <p><b>DISCONNECTED</b> aloof apathetic bored detached distant distracted indifferent numb uninterested withdrawn</p> <p><b>DISQUIET</b> agitated alarmed disconcerted disturbed perturbed rattled restless shocked startled surprised troubled turmoil uncomfortable uneasy unnerved unsettled upset</p>	<p><b>EMBARRASSED*</b> chagrined flustered mortified</p> <p><b>FATIGUE</b> beat burned out depleted exhausted lethargic listless sleepy tired weary worn out</p> <p><b>PAIN</b> anguish devastated grief heartbroken hurt lonely miserable regretful remorseful</p> <p><b>SAD</b> dejected despair despondent disappointed discouraged disheartened forlorn gloomy heavy hearted hopeless unhappy wretched</p>	<p><b>TENSE</b> anxious cranky distressed distraught edgy fidgety frazzled irritable jittery nervous overwhelmed restless stressed out</p> <p><b>VULNERABLE</b> fragile guarded helpless leery reserved sensitive shaky</p> <p><b>YEARNING</b> envious jealous longing nostalgic pining wistful</p>
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*N.B. The feelings marked with an asterisk (as well as shame & depression) tend to be mixed with judgmental thoughts. Separate thoughts from feelings to clarify the underlying emotions and the unmet needs they indicate. This clarity supports specific requests & invites compassion.*

## Needs

*“A need is the persistence of life in sustaining itself.” (Little, 2008)*

According to Rosenberg (2000), all human behaviour is motivated by needs and our feelings are directly linked to whether or not needs are being met or going unmet. At every moment people are attempting to meet their needs the best way they know how, using the strategies they have learned from their families, communities, and culture. Needs theory is largely credited to Abraham Maslow, however the research of Ryan Heavy Head and Narcisse Blood has revealed that Maslow was taught about needs theory by Blackfoot Elders in Alberta in 1938 (Blackstock, 2011; Heavy Head & Blood, 2007).

Tragically, coming from an individualistic Western perspective, Maslow misrepresented this as a pyramid hierarchy focused exclusively on individualized well-being rather than as a philosophy for community well-being (and by extension the actual well-being of individuals). According to Cindy Blackstock (2011), who draws upon the thinking of Native American scholar and child welfare expert Terry Cross, Maslow’s hierarchy placing individual physical needs at the bottom and individual self-actualization at the top, starkly contrasts the highly interdependent nature of needs with each other and with the cultural values and strategies informing how balance is achieved between them.

Blackstock also learned from Blackfoot scholar Billy Wadsworth that Maslow’s representation of needs theory is incomplete in its neglect of core needs for ancestral knowledge/ relationships, spirituality (not to be confused with religion), multi-dimensional reality, and the fundamental context of community (Blackstock, 2011). According to Blackfoot philosophy and practice, it is self actualization within the context of community actualization that form the foundation for all needs to be met, and not the other way around (Blackstock, 2011).

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### **Needs are at the heart of Nonviolent Communication practice, which holds that:**

- **Needs are universal (though strategies to meet them are cultural, social, &/or familial)**
  - **Needs activate feelings and motivate behaviour**
  - **Needs are mutually supportive (while our strategies may conflict)**
  - **Needs are not dependent on any specific person or place**
  - **Needs connect us to what fosters both surviving & thriving**
  - **People are responsible for expressing and meeting their own needs**
  - **People engage life most fully by meeting their own needs while honouring the needs of others (Rosenberg, 2000)**
-

Selinde Krayenhoff, a Certified Trainer with the international Center for Nonviolent Communication and a parent educator on Vancouver Island BC, neatly outlines how feelings guide us, informing us when needs are met or unmet. The following summarizes her outline:

Whenever people speak to me, they are expressing their own needs, even if they say “You should...” or “You are...” Nonviolent Communication helps translate language that might upset me (blame, shame, etc.) into a language of compassion:

- I can express my **FEELINGS & NEEDS** honestly, *or*
- Listen for the other person’s **FEELINGS & NEEDS** with empathy

When it becomes clear to me that other people are only ever trying to meet their own needs, *I can stop taking their behaviour personally*. I can see every interaction as an opportunity to connect with others and better understand the needs they are trying to meet. It is also an opportunity to engage in dialogue about how I experience their behaviour and invite support for the needs I am trying to meet as well.

- RESPONDING to oneself or others with EMPATHY is most likely to inspire a compassionate reply. Others are more likely to value my needs if I value theirs.
- REACTING to oneself or others with JUDGMENT and BLAME is most likely to inspire depressions, defensiveness, or an attack.

(adapted from Krayenhoff, 2004)

*“Awareness and clear expression of our needs and feelings leads to honest and respectful connections with others. It redirects our attention to what is truly alive in us at the present moment and also helps us connect with what others may be feeling and needing.”*

(Lamb, 2005)

# Needs Inventory

The following list of needs is neither exhaustive nor definitive:

**Table 5: Needs Inventory**

<p><b>CONNECTION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>acceptance</li> <li>affection</li> <li>appreciation</li> <li>belonging</li> <li>cooperation</li> <li>communication</li> <li>closeness</li> <li>community</li> <li>companionship</li> <li>compassion</li> <li>consideration</li> <li>consistency</li> <li>empathy</li> <li>inclusion</li> <li>intimacy</li> <li>love</li> <li>mutuality</li> <li>nurturing</li> <li>respect/self-respect</li> <li>safety</li> <li>security</li> <li>stability</li> <li>support</li> <li>to know and be known</li> <li>to see and be seen</li> <li>to understand and be understood</li> <li>trust</li> <li>warmth</li> </ul>	<p><b>HONESTY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>authenticity</li> <li>integrity</li> <li>presence</li> </ul> <p><b>PLAY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>joy</li> <li>humor</li> <li>fun</li> </ul> <p><b>PEACE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>beauty</li> <li>communion</li> <li>ease</li> <li>equality</li> <li>harmony</li> <li>inspiration</li> <li>order</li> </ul> <p><b>PHYSICAL WELL-BEING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>air</li> <li>food/nourishment</li> <li>movement/exercise</li> <li>rest/sleep</li> <li>sexual expression</li> <li>safety</li> <li>shelter</li> <li>touch</li> <li>water</li> </ul>	<p><b>MEANING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>awareness</li> <li>celebration of life</li> <li>challenge</li> <li>clarity</li> <li>competence</li> <li>consciousness</li> <li>contribution</li> <li>creativity</li> <li>discovery</li> <li>efficacy</li> <li>effectiveness</li> <li>growth</li> <li>hope</li> <li>learning</li> <li>mourning</li> <li>participation</li> <li>purpose</li> <li>self-expression</li> <li>stimulation</li> <li>to matter</li> <li>understanding</li> </ul> <p><b>AUTONOMY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>choice</li> <li>freedom</li> <li>independence</li> <li>space</li> <li>spontaneity</li> </ul>
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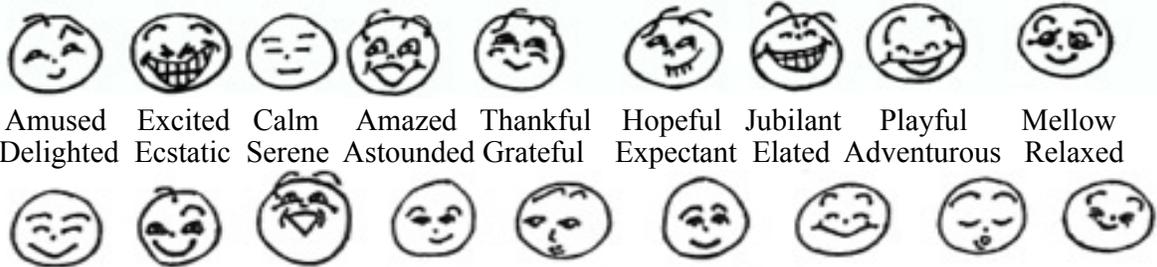
## Feelings & Needs

I take responsibility for my feelings by identifying and caring for my needs.  
I show empathy for others by connecting with what their feelings & needs might be.

Co-occurring Needs (Blackstock 2011; Heavy Head & Blood 2007; Maslow 1943)

<b>Physical Survival:</b> touch, food, water, shelter, air, exercise, stimulation, rest, trust
<b>Safety:</b> stability, justice, protection from physical/emotional violence, reassurance, healing, play
<b>Belonging:</b> mutual-respect, love, affection, appreciation, tolerance, contribution, celebration/ mourning
<b>Community-actualization:</b> harmony, beauty, peace, meaning, authenticity, integrity, ancestral wisdom
<b>Self-actualization:</b> choice, purpose, skill, clarity, creativity, respect, humility, courage, knowledge

### FEELINGS WHEN BASIC NEEDS ARE MET



Amused Excited Calm Amazed Thankful Hopeful Jubilant Playful Mellow  
Delighted Ecstatic Serene Astounded Grateful Expectant Elated Adventurous Relaxed

Blissful Interested Inspired Focused Curious Compassion Confident Relieved Happy  
Radiant Alert Open Assertive Inquisitive Empathy Comfortable Safe Content

### FEELINGS WHEN BASIC NEEDS ARE NOT MET



Frustrated Lonely Jealous Resentful Hurt Furious Frightened Disappointed  
Irritated Forlorn Envious Bitter Upset Exasperated

Nervous Apathetic Confused Critical Embarrassed Sad Mischievous Regret  
Anxious Numb Uncertain Contempt Mortified Heart-broken  
Worried Detached Perplexed Disdain Sorrowful

Enraged Shocked Exhausted Cranky Skeptical Gloomy Withdrawn Disgusted  
Hostile Alarmed Overwhelmed Annoyed Hesitant Hopeless Tentative Repulsed  
Rancorous Surprised Fried Tense Wary Blah Reluctant Grossed-out

(How Does Your Cat Feel Today, 1979; Little, 2008; Rosenberg, 2003)

## Translating Thoughts into Feelings & Needs

Imagine the feelings and needs you might be aware of if you were thinking the words in the left-hand column (ex: “I’m being betrayed”). How would you feel? What do you need?

**Table 6: Translation Exercise (Little, 2008)**

<b>Thought:</b> “I’m being...”	<b>Feelings</b>	<b>Needs</b>
1. Betrayed		
2. Blamed		
3. Criticized		
4. Ignored		
5. Manipulated		
6. Misunderstood		
7. Pressured		
8. Rejected		
9. Taken for granted		
10. Tricked		
11. Used		

## Clear Requests

*A specific, concrete request is the only way to clearly let others know what we want from them in relation to our feelings and needs.*

### The objectives of a request (Rosenberg, 2000):

- To build a relationship based on honesty and empathy
- To let others know how they can contribute to my life
- To find out if the other person is willing to meet my need
- To open a dialogue about each others' needs

### To make a clear and effective request (adapted from Krayenhoff, 2004):

Be aware of my intention (is it to connect with and value each person's needs, or is it to change the other person and get my own way?)

Think of offering an invitation (a request is not a demand, it is an opportunity for others to contribute to my life if that would also meet their needs, and to dialogue)

Use clear language

- Keep it positive (say what I want, rather than saying a "don't")
- Stay concrete & specific ("...by 3:00 today" *instead of* "...be on time")
- Focus on do-able actions ("...meet once a week?" *instead of* "...keep in touch?")

### Three kinds of requests (adapted from Krayenhoff, 2004):

1. Request for EMPATHY: "Would you tell me what you heard me say?"  
(Asking to be heard)
2. Request for HONESTY: "Would you tell me how you're feeling after hearing me say all that?"  
(Asking to hear how the other person is)
3. Request for ACTION: "Would you sit down with me now and schedule a weekly meeting?"  
(Asking for a specific strategy to meet needs beyond honesty and empathy)

## Empathy & Self-Empathy

*Empathy is listening with heartfelt, respectful attentiveness (Rosenberg, 2000)*

Listening happens best when holding focused silence while the other person speaks. Empathic listening can also mean holding silence, and focusing attention on another person's feelings and needs (or one's own), even if that person is not speaking.

Maintaining a full focus on the other person's feelings and needs involves:

- Paying attention
- Giving the time and space necessary to allow full expression
- Translating (silently) to feelings and needs
- Reflecting/paraphrasing *only* if clarity or reassurance is needed
- Waiting to see if there is more  
(Rosenberg, 2000)

Paraphrasing and reflecting are useful ways to clarify what has been said, and to offer reassurance that the other person has been heard. BUT, when we are speaking, we are no longer listening. Reflection and paraphrasing often support empathy, but they are not empathy themselves.

We offer empathy to meet our own needs (ex. for connection and contribution). We also hope that our intentions and behaviour will meet the others' needs. This often fosters a level of mutuality which can help us generate strategies that serve both parties.

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### Empathy Quotes

*"...when you are in ...distress and someone really hears without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels damn good! ...When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to re-perceive my world in a new way and go on. It is astonishing how elements which seem insoluble become soluble when someone listens...."* (Rogers, 1980, p12)

*"Opening our hearts also makes us vulnerable. In that vulnerability we fear that they may be broken. And yes, the world's pain does break our hearts, over and over again. But a broken heart is not a paralyzed heart. Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and the saints, prophets, and masters of all religions have revealed this. Hearts are broken **open**, not destroyed; and from an open heart's capacity to be with suffering, healing arises. Healing is not something that can be offered from a distance, an outside attempt to "fix" a problem. Rather, healing emerges from the act of "being with" suffering. The healing relationship is established by the authentic presence of an open heart."*  
(Roberts & Amidon, 1999)

# General Guidelines for Practicing Empathy

(Adapted from Skye, 2004)

Here are some steps that seem to support connecting empathically with others. They are only suggested guidelines, the goal is to fully “*be with*” the other person, rather than trying to “do something” to them or for them. The same principles are applied to oneself in practicing self-empathy.

**Stimulus** – someone says or does something

If I decide to listen with empathy, then I may be helped by these steps:

1. Pause
2. Breathe deeply
3. **Choose:** Partnership Paradigm (Restorative) or Dominator Paradigm (Retributive)
4. Think: If I am listening, then my focus is on the other person’s heart –  
**Ask myself: What is alive in that person? What are the feelings & needs?**  
(REMEMBER: *This is not about me*)
5. Consciously connect to my own sense of “grounded-ness” or “inner centre” and extend an empathic focus towards the other person’s heart: **feelings & needs.**
6. If my own feelings and needs rise up, acknowledge them and reassure myself that they will be attended to later. Return focus to connecting with the other person.
7. If I use words, I might guess or sense the **feelings and needs** of the other person and reflect them back. When I reflect, I use language that fits comfortably for myself and the other person
8. If I use words, I might match the energy of the other, with a little less intensity.
9. I stay with the other person and keep them company, holding space for their **feelings and needs**, until I notice a bodily relaxation, or an audible release of breath. I may simply notice that the other person has quieted. Either ask if there is anything more, or wait to see if there is anything more.
10. I may conclude my listening by asking “How are you?” and “Is there anything you would like from yourself or someone else just now?”

*“We will sit and listen without judging or reacting... We will sit and listen so attentively that we will be able to hear what has been left unsaid. We know that by listening deeply, we already alleviate a great deal of the pain and suffering in the other person.”* (Thich Nhat Hanh)

# Ten Obstacles to Empathic Listening

based on Thomas Gordon's "Parent Effectiveness Training" material

The following responses, which engage analytical thinking, are useful at different times. They can even help develop strategies for meeting needs. Unfortunately, these are often applied when empathy is most needed. Generally, people need to be fully heard first.

## 1) ADVISE, FIX, EDUCATE:

“If I were you, I’d...” “Why don’t you...” “You should read...”

## 2) EVALUATE, ANALYSE:

“You’re too sensitive...” “You should know better.” “They’re way out of line.”

## 3) EXPLAIN:

“Oh, I thought you meant...” “I didn’t know you wanted...” “What really happened is...”

## 4) INTERROGATE:

“What were you thinking?” “How long have you known?” “When did you...?”

## 5) ONE-UP:

“Wait ‘til you hear what happened to me...” “My child did that once, only it was worse...” “You’ve had your cast on for 2 months? Sue was in a brace for 2 years!”

## 6) CONSOLE:

“Poor you...” “There’s always next time...” “Every cloud has a silver lining...”

## 7) CORRECT:

“You’ve got it all mixed-up...” “Actually, it happened like this...” “I didn’t say that. I said...”

## 8) SYMPATHIZE:

“I know how much that hurts...” “I’m so sorry for you...” “What a jerk! I just can’t believe how he treated you. I’m so angry. I can’t imagine how you tolerated it”

## 9) SHUT-DOWN:

“You need to grow up.” “Think of other people...” “You’re always complaining!”

## 10) TELL A STORY:

“That reminds me of the time...” “When Alice had that problem, she...”

(Penny Wassman, circa 2004)

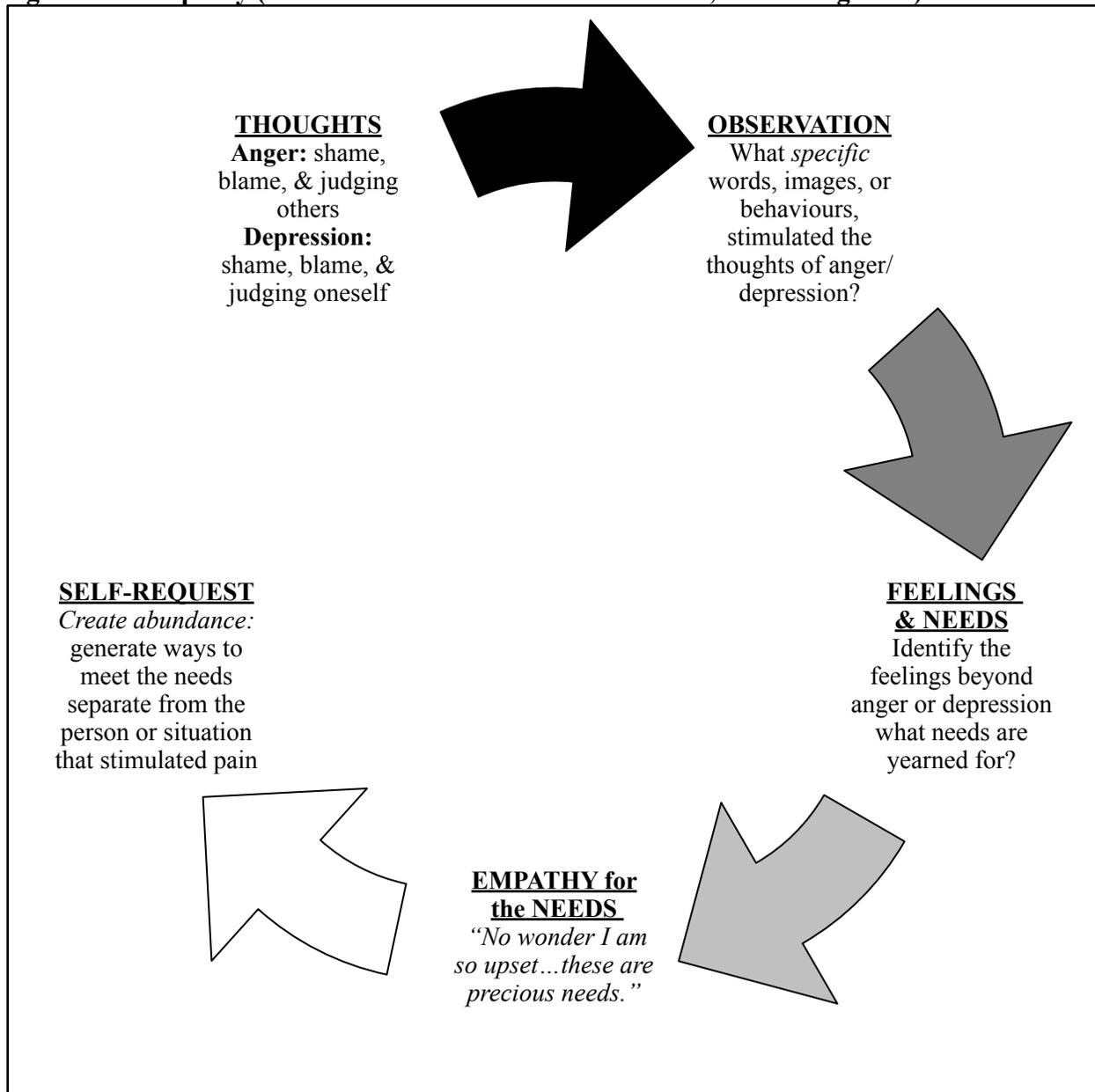
*Striving for intellectual understanding can block the quality of presence required for empathic connection.* (Rosenberg, 2000)

## Self-Empathy – Internal Dialogue

Nonviolent Communication also supports honest & empathic connection with oneself:

1. **Translate thoughts to Honesty** (observation, feelings, needs)
2. **Empathy for needs** (focus on how precious the need-based yearning is, & hold compassionate space for yourself the way you would support a child in distress, be present with the life in you)
3. **Self-Request** (creating abundance: requests you can make of yourself to meet your needs – separate from whatever is stimulating your anger/depression)

**Fig. 2: Self-Empathy (based on Nonviolent Communication, Rosenberg 2000)**



(Little, 2008)

\* Based on the 2004 "Beauty of Needs" workshop with Robert Gonzales & Susan Skye in Shawnigan Lake, BC, Canada (see [www.nvctraininginstitute.com](http://www.nvctraininginstitute.com))

## Nonviolent Communication as a Dialogue Process

NVC dialogue creates a dynamic and responsive interplay between:

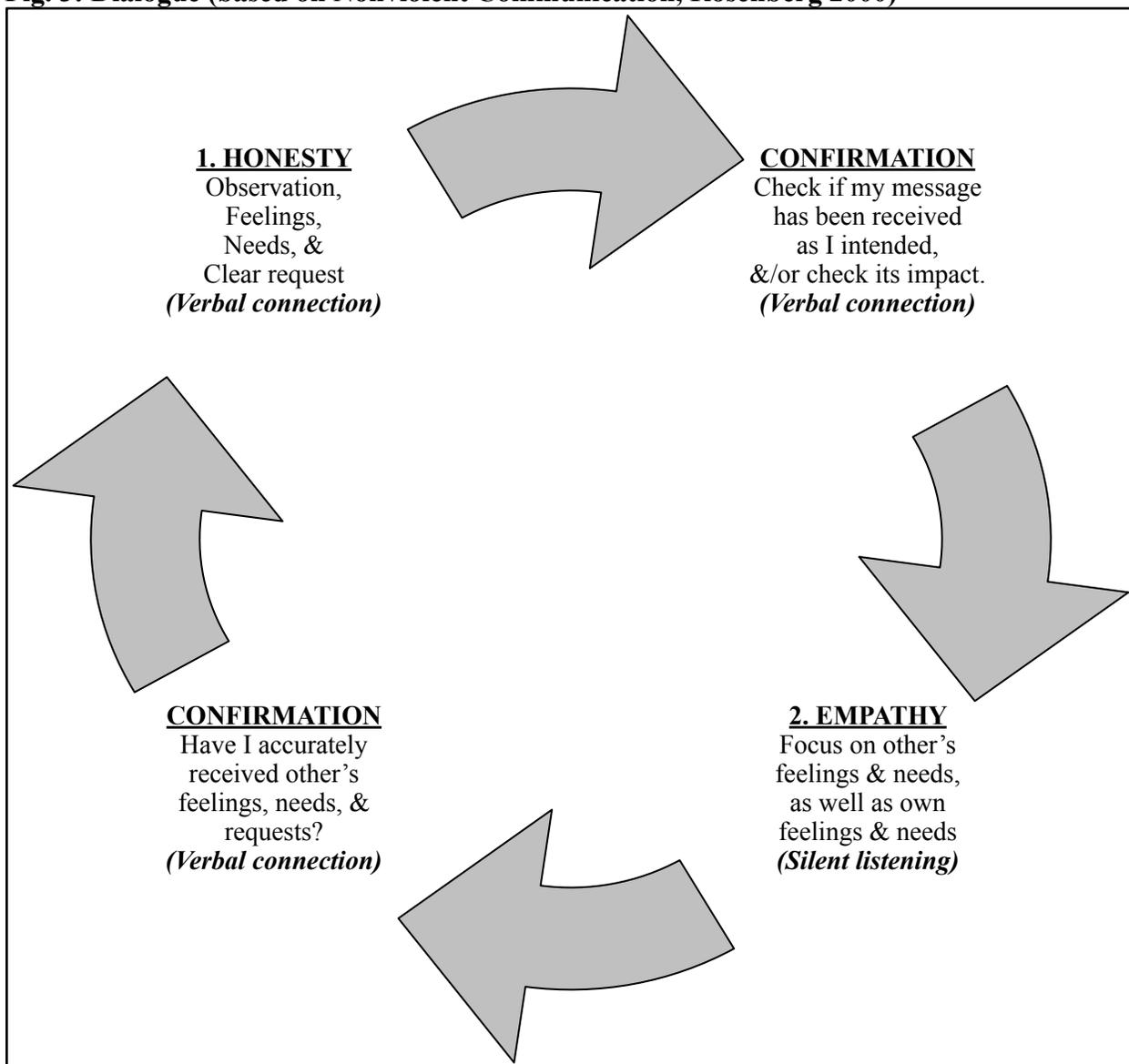
1. **Honesty** (When I see/hear..., I feel..., because I need... Would you...?);
2. **Empathy** (silent listening);

And

### Confirmation of each

(“Would you let me know what you’re hearing from me so I can check what I’ve said?” “Would you tell me how you are after hearing me say that?” “Are you feeling..., because you need...?”).

**Fig. 3: Dialogue (based on Nonviolent Communication, Rosenberg 2000)**



(Little, 2008)

## Nonviolent Communication Dialogue Within a Negotiation Process

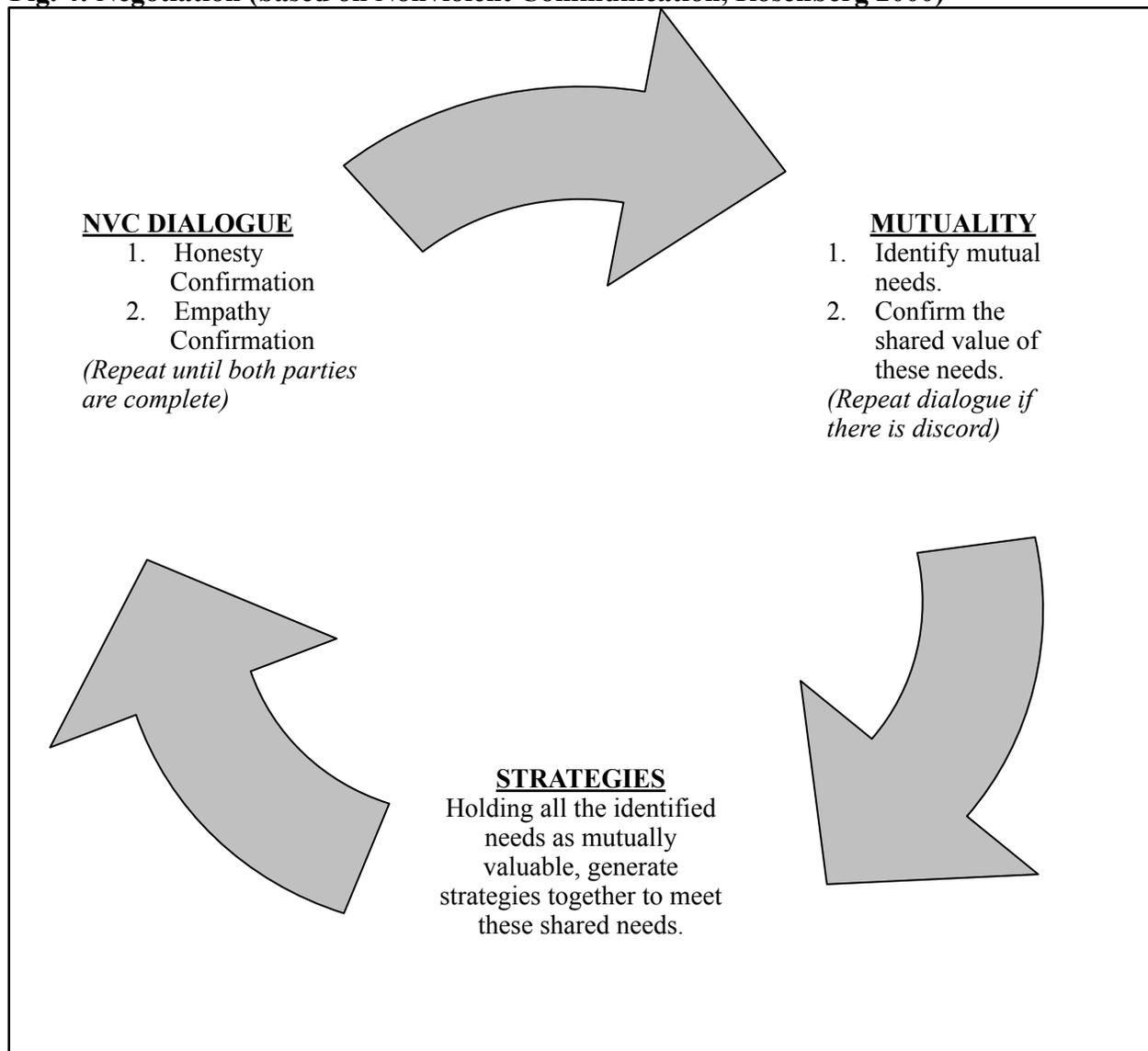
In a negotiation process, the NVC dialogue:

1. **Honesty** (When I see/hear..., I feel..., because I need... Would you...?);  
**Empathy** (listening);  
And **Confirmation of each**

Is followed by:

2. Identifying and confirming **mutual needs**, and
3. Together generating **mutually satisfying strategies** that will meet the needs identified.

**Fig. 4: Negotiation (based on Nonviolent Communication, Rosenberg 2000)**



(Little, 2008)

## Apology

Often after we behave in ways that do not serve life, we attack ourselves (depression), blame others (anger), justify our behaviour (defensiveness), or offer a formulaic apology (as an act of penance or pretence). None of which fosters re-connection with the person harmed by our behaviour, nor does it support making amends. An apology is a very different experience when it is rooted in sincere empathy followed by clear observations, heartfelt feelings, mutually valued needs, and concrete requests (of self & other). This kind of apology is not an end in itself, or a formulaic bandage, but the re-initiation of dialogue and restoration of relationship.

### 1. Observation:

I concretely & concisely describe aloud the specific words/actions of mine (that stimulated pain for another, AND which didn't meet *my own needs* for consideration, harmony, mutual respect, honesty, etc. – I wait a bit to express my unmet needs, empathy first, then honesty in an apology)

### 2. Empathy:

Guess aloud at what the feelings and unmet needs might be for the other person. Provide an opportunity for the person to be heard – listen deeply. Focus on the feelings and needs with silent heart-felt attentiveness. When the other person finishes speaking, becomes quiet, and seems to relax, ask if there is anything else. If it fits, I reflect back the heart of what I heard.

### 3. Honesty:

Ask if the other person would be willing to hear what's going on for me. Express the feelings that come up for me right now as I recall my words/behaviour, and identify my own unmet needs and deep regret. Ask how the other person is feeling after hearing all that. Empathize further if necessary. Repeat regrets and ask if there is something they would like to request from me to meet both our needs now and to make amends. I may also offer suggestions of restorative strategies and make internal requests of myself regarding the choices I will make next time.

## Appreciation

We often reserve empathy and full presence for people in distress, but it can be incredibly satisfying to attend someone's delight with the same level of compassion – focusing on the feelings of delight and the needs that have been met. It is also fun to express our appreciation with needs-based honesty:

1. **Observation:** What has the other person said or done that I am enjoying?
2. **Needs:** What needs of mine have been met by the other person's behaviour?
3. **Feelings:** How am I feeling as a result of my satisfied needs?

“When you say/do \_\_\_\_\_, I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because my need for \_\_\_\_\_ is met. Thank you”

*“Our biological repertoire offers many possibilities: violence and nonviolence, indifference and empathy, caring and cruelty, creativity and destructiveness. Which of these possibilities we actualize largely depends on social contexts and cues – on what we experience and what we learn to believe is normal, necessary, or appropriate... At the core of partnership education is learning, both intellectually and experientially, that the partnership and dominator models are two underlying alternatives for human relations. Relations based on fear, violence, and domination, are a possibility. However, what distinguishes us as a species is not our cruelty and violence but our enormous capacity for caring and creativity. Constructing relations and institutions that more closely approximate the partnership model helps us actualize these capacities.” (Eisler 2000, p. 9)*

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## Reflective poems

### Empathy

Listening

Ears open

Eyes open

Mind open

Listening with my whole body

My whole heart

Listening to you

Listening to me

Not to fix

Or judge

Or pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey

Not to find any answers

Or solve any riddles

Just listening

Ears open

Eyes open

Whole body

Whole heart

To bear witness

To bear presence

To bear the fullness and richness

Of this moment of your experience

My experience

Fully present

Ears open

Eyes open

Whole body

Whole heart

(Little, 2008)

## Honestly

These thoughts, these words  
That I'm saying,  
Seem to tie your eyebrows in knots,  
And fill your eyes with tears,  
And tighten the muscles of your jaw.

I see your whole body tense  
As you try to understand what you have heard.  
What you say I've said.

You are trying so hard  
To understand  
These things I did not say,  
Or mean,  
Or even think.

You point your finger at me,  
And hiss through your teeth:  
Like a wildcat defending its space,  
Keeping its place,  
Saving its face.

I would like to be heard differently.

I want to speak to you with honesty and clarity and tenderness.  
I want you to know what is so alive in me.  
I want you to hear the tenderness I feel  
When I think of you,  
Or me.

The tenderness of a purple bruise pressed firmly with a thumb.  
The tenderness of a skinned knee.  
The tenderness of fingertips;  
Of a squalling newborn overwhelmed by the first breath;  
Of a family curled up together under Nana's quilt,  
On a golden Saturday morning.

The tenderness of my aching middle.  
Aching to be understood,  
Aching to understand.

Would you tell me what you're hearing me say now?  
(Little, 2008)

**October, 2020**

**About the author:**

Marion Little, BA Linguistics, MA Dispute Resolution, manages Community Services and Training at the John Howard Society of Peterborough. This includes Community Mediation and conflict coaching for adults and youth, Aspire youth mentorship, Suspension/ Expulsion programming, parent education, and fee-for-service professional development in conflict resolution skills. She is also co-founder of a collaborative developing Restorative Justice Practices to address sexual violence that falls outside policing, or involves re-integration post sanctions. Her work is deeply informed by Restorative Principles, anti-oppressive practice, trauma-informed practice, and decolonization efforts.

Marion is a Certified Trainer with the international Centre for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC), a Certified Restorative Justice Facilitator with the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), and a Certified Mediator Trainer recognized by the Ontario Community Mediation Coalition (OCMC). She is a past Master Trainer for Canadian Red Cross Respect Education abuse prevention program (Western Region).

Marion is a past Adjunct Professor in the School of Public Administration MA Dispute Resolution Program, and a past Sessional Instructor with the School of Public Health and Social Policy BA program at the University of Victoria. Courses taught include:

- Collaborative Leadership, Governance & Decision-Making (classroom based)
- Ethics & Reflective Practice for Mediators (classroom based & online)
- Non-profit Program Planning & Project Management (online)
- Non-profit Human Resources & Fiscal Management (online)

She has served as Executive Director for charitable non-profits addressing youth homelessness, affordable childcare, and peer-to-peer crisis supports for sex workers. She has also served as the Human Resources Specialist administering sexual misconduct policy for the Anglican Diocese of BC. Marion is a Past-President of the BC Network for Compassionate Communication, a founding member of the Vancouver Island Criminal Justice Association (a Canadian CJA chapter), and served as an accredited Canadian Observer at the 2011 United Nations Commission for the Status of Women.

Since 1990, Marion has explored intersections between communication skills, empathy, and conflict resolution, concentrating on capacity-building for youth and adults in the community. Her team research projects in US and Canadian schools assess the impact of Nonviolent Communication training (Rosenberg, 1999) on peer harassment, bullying, self-harm, and school climate.

The heart of her work, whether academic or in-the-field, is her deep commitment to community wellness, dignity, and safe sanctuary.

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**Video defining compassion:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OK\\_Is4\\_xFfU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OK_Is4_xFfU)