

Working for Peace Without Recreating War

by Miki Kashtan and Dot Maver

*“I suppose leadership
at one time meant
muscles; but today it
means getting along
with people.”*

—Gandhi

IMAGINE THAT YOU ARE TALKING TO A STATE LEGISLATOR ABOUT PEACE AND reducing violence, and in response you hear: “Are you another one of those anti-war people? Don’t you understand we are waging war for peace?” How would you respond?

Like most people who hope to bring about peace for everyone on our planet, you have likely had conversations with people who hold very different opinions from your own. Whether with family members, in work places, during a demonstration, or even within your own activist groups, these conversations often heat up and turn into arguments. Despite our desire for peace, we continue to perpetuate the very thing we want to transcend.

How do we bring our way of relating with people into line with our core values and ideals? In our experience, we have found that the practice of Nonviolent Communication (NVC)—a set of skills anyone can learn (see box on page 31)—can hugely increase the effectiveness of nonviolent social change, both inside our activist organizations and with those we are trying to connect with outside.

Since June 2005, scores of activists have had access to a unique resource: a monthly ninety-minute conference call to receive support, coaching, reflection, and empathy in applying Nonviolent Communication. The results of this apparently simple strategy surprised us. The activists who attended (all of whom were volunteers with the U.S. Department of Peace [DOP] campaign—[see box]) often became more enthusiastic about their commitment to their campaign, and more confident in surfacing difficulties and moving through conflicts with peers and legislative representatives. Enthusiasm for learning and applying Nonviolent Communication has grown in the network. Since 2006, organizers of regional and national DOP gatherings have been adding trainings and workshops in NVC skills to their agendas. Though not every activist seized this work as a path to more effective participation in the campaign, many have and are actively doing so.

This article is an opportunity for us to celebrate what has happened, and to share this model with other activist networks. Many *Tikkun* readers are connected to the Network of Spiritual Progressives (NSP). Starting in April we (Bay Area Nonviolent Communication) will provide the same kind of monthly calls to NSP members, which we hope will help to increase the national impact of the NSP.

Core Challenges to Being Peace

PEACE ACTIVISTS TYPICALLY EXPERIENCE FOUR AREAS OF CHALLENGE IN THEIR efforts to *practice* nonviolence in the present while working *for* a nonviolent world in the future:

1. **Within Each of Us:** Many activists experience fatigue, burnout, doubt, and internal conflict. They want self-connection, self-acceptance, a sense of integrity, and vitality.
2. **Within the Movement:** Many activists experience conflict within the movement, as well as reduced productivity, difficulty staying focused on a task, and mistrust. They

want effectiveness in running meetings, mutually satisfying relationships working towards a shared goal, and faith in their ability to connect with colleagues.

3. **With Family Members and Friends:** Many activists dread family gatherings, which are often either superficially pleasant or acrimonious. They want a way to maintain relationships of love and openness and the capacity to engage with different viewpoints productively.
4. **With People across the Political Divide:** Many activists feel discouragement about opening and maintaining dialogue with people and officials in fundamental disagreement with their positions. They want effective communication, capacity to stay in dialogue, and hope for transformation.

Activists operate on all these levels. As Gandhi said: “The way of peace is the way of truth.... We may never be strong enough to be entirely non-violent in thought, word and deed. But we must keep non-violence as our goal and make steady progress towards it.” Alas, we still see much evidence that many people engage in nonviolent *action* while their thoughts and speech remain unchanged. From the first conference call, participants repeatedly expressed how often they find themselves angry, fearful, even outright hostile to the people they most want to reach and influence.

What can Nonviolent Communication offer activists?

NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION PLAYS A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN THE transformation of caring, angry activists to caring, compassionate people working together for a cause. As we address the internal dimension consisting of consciousness, personal skill, and language, a slow groundswell of transformation is happening within individuals and within the DOP movement. This cultural shift within the movement serves as a blueprint and preparation for a larger cultural shift towards peace.

The monthly calls sustain the commitment to peace through the basic practice of attending to the needs of all concerned while consciously resolving conflict before it escalates to violence. We work together towards this intention by focusing on three core practices that support movement towards mutually beneficial solutions that stem from full connection:

1. We aim to shift from a focus on what we oppose to clear inner connection with what we want to create.
2. We aim to listen empathically to others, even in times of great disagreement, to hear what it is they want to create, and to give them the experience of being heard and understood (*not* agreed with, just heard and understood).
3. When an opening exists, we aim to express succinctly, without blame or criticism, what is of importance to us, and to include clear requests that support continuing the dialogue to full connection.

Some activists remain suspicious of what they worry would be only a “feel good” practice. Some are even concerned that anyone who experiences the power of inner peace and self-connection that arise through the practice of NVC, might not even *want* to continue engaging in social change efforts.

Instead, DOP activists have found that focusing on the transformation within allows them to have more energy, more faith in the possibility of transformation, *less* reactivity, and *more* willingness to take risks. Bringing the skills of clear expression and empathic listening to their work, they say, is increasing their capacity to engage with conflict with more confidence and grace.

About the Peace Alliance and the U.S. Department of Peace (USDOP) Campaign

The Peace Alliance (www.thepeacealliance.org) is a non-partisan citizen action organization advocating for legislation that supports a culture of peace, working to foster positive, proactive change toward the creation of a more nonviolent and peaceful world. The Peace Alliance motivates and coordinates a nationwide movement of independent grassroots activists who are campaigning in all fifty states and the District of Columbia for passage of legislation currently before Congress that will establish a U.S. Department of Peace (HR808).

Sixty-eight members of the House Representatives have signed on to the legislation so far; a third of what's needed to pass the bill. These numbers are growing slowly and steadily, along with the popular support for the bill: thirty-two city and county governments, representing a population of 12.8 million people, have endorsed the bill so far.

The movement that the USDOP Campaign is part of is now international in scope through the Global Alliance for Ministries and Departments of Peace. At the Japan Summit in September 2007, Miki facilitated a group of delegates from twenty-one countries and six continents, who embraced NVC as a means of communicating with one another across cultures and politics.

About Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) was developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s. Since then, NVC has been taught and used around the world in intentional communities, prisons, school communities, families, and organizations. It contributes skills and insight to individuals seeking to transform their personal lives as well as to take leadership in creating a world that works for all. The global network now includes NVC groups working in seventy-five countries. Over 200 trainers are affiliated with the global Center for Nonviolent Communication (www.cnvc.org). Within the NVC network, we see that when individuals and communities integrate the vision of nonviolence and master the skills necessary to engage in dialogue with others in difficult situations, creativity is unleashed and long-lasting, peaceful solutions are found.

NVC rests on several core assumptions and principles, including:

1. Violence of Any Kind Results from Unmet Needs
2. Being Heard is Key to Transformation
3. Everyone Matters

A set of skills anyone can learn can hugely increase the effectiveness of nonviolent social change.

NVC Resources

If you want to engage with the practice of Nonviolent Communication, consider these options:

1. Starting in April *Tikkun* will be sponsoring monthly conference calls for NSP members using the same format as the DOP calls. For more information, see ad on page 74.
2. To participate in a training, visit www.cnvc.org for trainers close to you. For offerings in the San Francisco Bay Area or with Miki Kashtan, visit www.baynvc.org. For an online training option, visit www.nvctraining.com
3. To find study materials, visit www.cnvc.org or www.nonviolentcommunication.com.

As one congressional district team leader said, “I was speaking to someone in the campaign and said very negative things about a certain politician. My State Coordinator used NVC to help me understand on a workable level how important it is to bring the message of peace in a peaceful way.” And a campaign state leader shared: “I continue to see the exploration of how we can ‘be the change’ in challenging circumstances within the campaign as enough to keep me in these [difficult] conversations.”

Becoming Peace from Within

DURING THE CALLS, WE ADDRESS SPECIFIC CHALLENGES THAT PEOPLE BRING from their work and lives. One of the core practices is training our attention to focus on hearing the other person, so we can understand the meaning behind their words or actions, and thus open our hearts to seeing the full humanity of whomever we are in conflict with.

Here’s an excerpt from one call, as Miki (the NVC trainer) works with person A, from Atlanta:

A: I was talking to a state legislator about women’s reproductive rights, and he immediately responded with ‘murdering babies.’ I wanted to reach a place where I understood more about what he was saying, and I wanted him to understand what I was saying, but that sort of ended the conversation with a bristling back sort of response.

Miki: In his statement about murdering babies, what did you hear mattered to him?

A: What did I hear? End of conversation. He didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

Miki: What is the value in the name of which he says this line? Can you hear it? The biggest hint that I will give you is that you share that value.

A: I know, I have a grandbaby that’s three months old.

Miki: I want you to just name the value.

A: I agree with him. I’m pro-life myself.

Miki: Don’t agree or disagree, name the value.

A: Human life.

Miki: OK. There you go.

Notice that A needed two reminders to name the value before he finally let go of agreeing or disagreeing. This is not because A has a unique personal problem. Over the last several thousand years, we have been deeply trained that to resolve conflicts is to get people to agree with our views and wishes, using force if necessary. It takes practice and commitment to undo this habit and listen first so we can prepare the ground for productive dialogue.

Dialogue for Connection through Conflict

AS A RESULT OF BEING ON THE CALLS, AND EITHER WITNESSING OR PRACTICING THIS form of communication, many activists have reported a dramatically increased capacity to *listen and reflect* before speaking about their own concerns.

It puts us in a vulnerable place to let go of “being right” and instead focus on understanding someone else’s heart, especially if they are upset, angry, or in a polarized position. It is precisely that vulnerability that supports the diffusion of conflict and the establishing of human connection. What we have found most inspiring about this shift from agree/disagree to understanding the meaning behind what someone says is that as we make this shift we *feel* differently. Something changes inside of us. We are no longer separate from the Other. Our very capacity to hear another humanizes them to us and creates more space. *Both* of us are transformed.

As a result, when we then turn to expressing what is of meaning to us, the other person is likely to be more ready to listen, and we are more ready to speak *with* the other person rather than at him or her. The chances that we will (*continued on page 64*)

available, but it is up to the wrongdoer to appropriate the gift—to open the window and draw the curtains aside. He does this by acknowledging the wrong he has done, so letting the light and fresh air of forgiveness enter his being.” In the next paragraph, Tutu cites Jesus in support of this view. So far as I can tell, Tutu is speaking from within a Christian outlook about forgiveness as a gift bestowed by the victim upon the offender. I would be very surprised if this is the only such passage in Christian literature.

One reason is that this conception of the gift of forgiveness flows naturally from the idea that forgiveness is unconditional and unilateral, and that it is not *self*-forgiveness that is at stake, but rather forgiveness *of the other*. In all such cases, the notion is inherently relational or other-directed. Furthermore, consider Meninger’s own talk in his book *The Process of Forgiveness* about “God’s gift of grace.” God’s gift to us is certainly relational (God is not giving grace and forgiveness to himself). In forgiving our fellows, are we not taking as our model God’s unconditional love—that love of which the “gift of grace” is an expression? Meninger seems to answer affirmatively since he wants us to imitate, in our relations to others, God’s love of us. He writes in *The Process of Forgiveness* “The Father loves all his children without conditions, and we are told to love one another in the same way. Indeed if we are to love one another for the love of God, it must also be that very love of God which we have for each other. This is an unconditional love.” But then, the metaphor of the gift is an appealing way to characterize our unconditional forgiveness of others. Presumably this is one reason why Tutu uses it. My point was that on reflection, the metaphor itself pushes against the idea of forgiveness as unconditional, and for good reason: perfected forgiveness isn’t unconditional. Where this leaves the concept of “God’s gift of grace” I would not venture to say.

Meninger concludes his stimulating reply with a compelling rhetorical question. The answer to his question is affirmative. ■

A Further Thought

by William Meninger

Thomas Aquinas said, “Never deny, seldom affirm, always distinguish.” Perhaps we should distinguish between philosophical forgiveness and the practical experience of forgiveness. In practice reciprocity is obviously not a necessity for the experience of forgiveness. Christians (and others) take as their model Jesus on the cross, who prayed, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do!” I don’t think we should allow verbal definitions to define this away as something other than forgiveness. It is necessary for the good of society (individually or collectively) for an individual to be able to forgive a perpetrator who is dead or absent or even unknown. Otherwise there would be no option but frustration, seeking vengeance on uninvolved parties (family feuds), unrequited anger and festering growth of evil effects that should have been long ago released.

When I was six years old, I stood weeping before the coffin of my dead father. A woman, whom I do not remember, told me that my father would not like to see me crying and so I had to smile. She actually forced me to smile as I stood grieving for my dead father. I hated her for years, not even knowing who she was. Not until I was an adult was I able to release that hatred by forgiving her.

Also, a word should be said about condoning, taken in the sense of making excuses for the perpetrator. To some degree, this may be necessary. I think that most of the harm people inflict upon one another is viewed quite differently by the perpetrator and by the victim. To the degree that the victim can be brought to see the action of the perpetrator from his point of view, the act of forgiveness can be seen as that much more reasonable—or even perhaps even unnecessary if no harm was intended. The harmful action lives on in the mind of the victim and grows and distorts itself until it sometimes becomes something quite different from what it was in actual fact. An effort to understand this might well lead to some form of condoning. Indeed, is not some form of condoning very explicitly included in the words, “Father, forgive them. They know not what they do”? ■

WORKING FOR PEACE

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then be heard increase immeasurably from this simple and difficult exercise of pausing before responding, and listening for meaning, for common values, for our shared humanity.

In changing our listening and speaking habits, we shift from debate to dialogue. Martin Buber defined dialogue as a conversation with an unknown outcome. To be open to an unknown outcome requires a willingness to be changed by the encounter with another. If we are unwilling to be changed, on what basis can we expect another to be changed by what we say? It is only when we can see and respect the humanity and intelligence of an “opponent” that the door to finding mutually satisfying solutions opens.

Here’s an example of how Carol Hillson, USDOP Campaign State Coordinator from New York, used her skills at a recent political event where she spoke with someone about her involvement with the campaign.

As soon as he heard the word “peace”, he immediately said: “Peace is ineffective, the only thing ‘these people’ understand is force.” I instantly became excited about the opportunity to try to connect with a person whose views were so different from my own. I wanted to try and focus on areas where we could find common ground. So I said: “That’s really interesting, so what you are really concerned about is security and effectiveness? I can really appreciate that.”

Then I paused, to check if that was enough connection. Seeing a nod, and what looked like some willingness to hear me, I added: “What you may find interesting about the DOP campaign is that it is all about reducing violence effectively. Domestically, for instance, it would support programs that reduce bullying in schools, that help prevent gang violence, etc...” In other words, I tied what I said to what I had just connected with him

about, to increase the chances he would hear me. To which he said, “Well, I’m all for reducing violence in schools. Who wouldn’t be for that?”

We may leave any one conversation without an immediate outcome. But our willingness to engage, to model what we are working towards, leaves people we interact with more open to hear more in the future, to reflect on their views, to be more curious about what we are doing. We plant seeds this way, even if we are not around to harvest the fruits of our interactions. And the seeds may bear more fruit than we can easily foresee.

Seven representatives spoke together passionately about the DOP bill at the closing event of the national USDOP conference in February. In addition, activists were able to schedule over 220 meetings in the House and the Senate during the conference, often meeting with the actual Member. Many more drop-in visits were held as well. Is it possible that this movement’s growing capacity to engage with opposing views paved the way for more members of congress from both parties to engage with the campaign?

Core Intentions for Principled Nonviolent Activism

To align our work with our vision and principles—so we can embody nonviolence and peace in our thoughts, words, and actions—we are called to address the four levels at which we experience challenges:

1. *Within Each of Us*—Being Grounded in Vision and Values: To sustain self-connection, integrity, and vitality we are called to shift our focus from what’s wrong to what we envision as an alternative. This shift in focus happens in terms of vision and in terms of what values and commitments sustain us. The practice of uncovering the underlying needs in each situation supports us in embodying this intention in each moment. For example, L’s sense of a painful interaction she had recently with a representative’s aide shifted dramatically when she was able to connect with her need: basic recognition as a citizen. Instead of anger and resignation, she found in the incident an opportunity to become *more* connected with herself: “I think it’s bring-

ing an awareness that I did not realize was so deep. I don’t think I made this kind of connection with myself. I’m surprised.”

2. *Within the Movement*—Taking Leadership Seriously: To increase effectiveness, cohesion, and a sense of purpose we are called to step into leadership in all our interactions with colleagues. This leadership is a commitment to take full power, to work with others to ensure that everyone’s needs are addressed, to craft strategies all parties can live with, and to support others in experiencing full choice.

3. *With Family Members and Friends*—Open-Heartedness: To maintain satisfying, authentic relationships with our loved ones we are called to keep our hearts open to ourselves and to others, so we can prioritize connection, compassion, and understanding in our relationships.

4. *With People across the Political Divide*—Transforming Enemy Images: To open up the possibilities of connecting with people different from us, the people we are most afraid of, the people we least understand and respect, we are called to the simple and difficult practice of seeing the shared human needs and aspirations behind all actions and opinions. As we do this, we discover that they are not so different from us after all. Says Cathy Barham, USDOP activist: “It was during these role playing conversations that I understood on a workable level how important it is to bring the message of peace in a peaceful way. I knew it intellectually but I required that experiential teaching that moves one’s knowing through an ‘Aha!’ moment and into the self. I could then be more confident in a conversation about peace. I finally understood that I can go to the politician or anyone with the idea of laying a foundation of what we *both* want for our community.”

Reflecting in a similar vein, Owen, another USDOP activist, shared: “The tools of NVC have been a huge asset in being able to see the needs of my reps in congress in the actions or non-actions they choose. It has helped me to gain clarity and be able to speak and write in a way that honors and respects their needs, even as I disagree with the strategies they use. It also helps me refrain from knee jerk reactions and defense mechanisms to throw back when I’m hearing something that is not meeting my

Did the activists’ growing capacity to engage with opposing views pave the way for more members of congress from both parties to engage with them?

needs for respect, empathy, and understanding. I’m convinced that the more deeply I am immersed in the process of NVC in my interactions with congressmen, the more likely I will make an impact on change in this country. I feel very empowered and hopeful because of that and am so grateful.”

To sustain our work, to be nourished and hopeful about what we do, and to create long-lasting results, we are called to an ongoing commitment to practice nonviolence, as all of us have been raised in a culture of domination, separation, and war. We come to social change work often in great despair and anger, and want to see immediate sweeping results. It takes effort and practice to remind ourselves that we are never guaranteed results. We make the effort regardless, for our own sense of integrity and care, and heart and presence in the world. As J, an activist from Texas said: “It is my dream that one day the communication techniques of NVC will be practiced so widely that they will no longer be known by any name, they’ll just be taught by example as children are growing up—as culturally-accepted “givens” of human social interaction—and I’m telling myself that will be a great day for peace in the world!” ■

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