



Forgiving the Past by Focusing on the Present

From Speak Peace in a World of Conflict

By Marshall Rosenberg, PhD.

Very often, a lot of healing work goes on in our trainings. Realize first of all that this takes place in front of as many as eighty or ninety people, so you might say there are many witnesses to the efficacy of our approach. Participants regularly tell me they get more out of thirty or forty minutes of what I've done than they received from six or seven years of traditional psychotherapy.

In my workshops, we talk very little about what happened in the past. I've found that talking about what happened in the past not only doesn't help healing; it often perpetuates and increases pain. This goes very much against what I was taught in my training in psychoanalysis.

Certainly our current pain is stimulated by the past, and we don't deny how the past is affecting the present. But I've learned over the years that you heal by talking about what's going on in the moment, in the now.

How do I do this? In workshops, I often play the role of the person who stimulated most of the other person's pain in the past. Not infrequently this is a parent. I might be playing the role of a father who beat or sexually molested this person as a child.

So now I'm sitting with this person who's been in pain for years, and I play the role of the person who is the stimulus for the pain as though that individual knows Nonviolent Communication. I begin with empathy and say, "What's still alive in you as a result of what I have done?"

See, we're not going into the past and talking about what I did, but about what's alive in you now that's still there from what happened in the past.

Often the person doesn't know NVC, so they don't know how to tell me what's alive in them except through diagnosis: "How could you do it? You know, you were cruel. How could a father beat a child that way?"

In NVC we know that all these diagnoses are just tragic expressions of what a person is feeling and needing at this moment. Role-playing the father, I empathically connect with her pain, even if she isn't expressing it in a very clear way.

I continue until they have been fully understood about what's alive in them now that's still so painful. And then when they have received all the understanding they need, I mourn – still in the role of the father. Not apologize, but mourn.

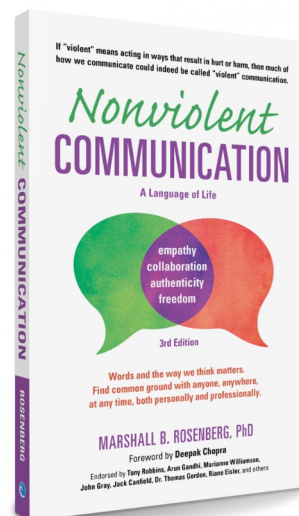
NVC shows us a big difference between mourning and apology. Apology is basically part of our violent language. It implies wrongness – that you should be blamed, that you should be penitent, that you're a terrible person for what you did. And when you agree that you are a horrible person and when you have become sufficiently penitent, you can be forgiven. Sorry is part of that game, you see. If you hate yourself enough, you can be forgiven.

Now, in contrast, what is really healing for people is not that game where we agree that we're terrible, but rather going inside yourself and seeing what need of yours was not met by the behavior. And when you are in touch with that, you feel a different kind of suffering. You feel a natural suffering, a kind of suffering that leads to learning and healing, not to hatred of oneself, not to guilt.

So, in the role of the father, having empathized with my daughter, I then mourn. I might say something like, "I feel terribly sad to see that my way of handling my pain at the time could result stimulate so much pain for you. And my needs were not met by that. My needs were just the opposite, to contribute to your well-being."

After the mourning, the next step is for the father to explain to the daughter what was alive in him when he did those horrible things in the past. We do go into the past at this point, not to talk about what happened but to help the daughter see what was alive in the father at the time he did this.

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In some cases the father might sound like this: "I was in such pain in so many parts of my life — my work wasn't going well, I was feeling like a failure. So when I would see you and your brother screaming, I didn't know what else to do to handle my pain except in the brutal way that I did."

When the father can honestly express what was alive in him, and the daughter can empathize with that, and can see that, it's amazing how much healing can take place. What's surprising for some people is that all of this can happen in an hour — and in front a room full of people.

Marshall Rosenberg, PhD. is the author of the internationally acclaimed Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life (/store/product_info.php?products_id=37), Speak Peace in a World of Conflict (/store/product_info.php?products_id=28), and several other books and booklets.

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