

Journalist Interview with Towe Widstrand and Marianne Göthlin

1. What is the state of communication in common society in your opinion? Is the tendency of majority of people going towards violent or non-violent approach? Why and how is this obvious?

Towe:

I see two different directions. One is pointing towards a more violent society where the language is used in a more aggressive way in the public arena. Some groups of young people use very harsh language and it is spreading rapidly among girls as well. Examples are bullying on internet, a more aggressive attitude in public dialogues. Another is the amount of violence that mass media is offering. The nature of the violence that is displayed has become nastier and we tolerate it more than before. The risk, as I see it, is that it becomes a habitual part of "normal" life. The comprehensive use of violent computer games can also contribute in this direction.

The other direction is the reaction to what I am touching upon above. A growing consciousness in large groups about the effects of this development if it continues to grow. Individuals and groups that are looking for other ways of relating to each other than the traditional with use of threats, violence and enemy images. One example is that after 9/11 the amount of material that was sold by CNVC doubled and has not decreased since. It was as people were saying "enough is enough". The sad thing is that efforts like this don't get much attention in media since it doesn't "sell" as well as violence and catastrophes.

Marianne:

I hear teachers express a sense of powerlessness and insecurity today as the habitual way of being an authority is no longer providing an effective learning environment. Communication can be strongly judgmental in the classrooms. Many teachers are looking for new ways of relating to students since our time, and younger generation, is asking more of inclusion and participation. Underlying there is a constant public voice, demanding order in schools and teachers to be directive and transmit knowledge. To be able to participate in a fruitful dialogue - including listening and speaking up for your needs - is fundamental to build trust and avoid escalating violence. NVC attitude and skills can support qualities as mutual respect, understanding, joy, clarity and care in everyday school life. These are basic skills in a democratic setting and can be applied in any situation.

In a powerful way NVC reminds us to be aware of our values, our goals and intentions and speak in ways which reflect those.

2. This state of society is the consequence of individual actions and characteristics. How can an individual communicate in a way that it contributes to peace and harmony with the others?

Towe:

There are some basics; i.e. the understanding and consciousness that we are responsible for our intentions and reactions. Re intention; We can always ask ourselves whether we want to contribute to a peaceful resolution in a conflict or conduct power over, that is our choice. Re reactions; others can't make us feel anything, our feelings are a result to if our needs are met or not. Secondly, when we use language and thinking that is reflecting force and coerciveness others will go in to defensive thinking and start to defend their free will. It is part of the human nature to want to contribute to others' wellbeing, if we can do it willingly. But we are so trained to use words like "have to", "must", "should", that we believe that that is the truth.

The ultimate test is how to say "no" and make borders in a way that are not intended as threats and force, but rather protecting needs.

Marianne:

NVC is based on two qualities in our interactions, honesty and empathy. To clearly say what you mean without inflicting guilt and blame on others, and to listen with attention to what is alive in the other person regardless of how the message is coming across.

3. It this (non-violent communication skills) a characteristic (skill) that one can learn or is born with it? Why + how?

Towe:

As small children we are very honest with what is going on with us. Gradually we learn that it is not OK to show what we want and our emotional reactions when we don't get what we want. We are told we are "bad", "selfish", "greedy". So we start to manipulate the surrounding in different ways to get our needs met. To regain this ability to express honestly and at the same time take responsibility for our needs most often has to be relearned. How? Through practise, practise, practise.

Marianne:

I truly believe that we are with wisdom to live peacefully together. From working with children I notice their easy access to compassion. Easier than what I experience amongst adults. When a parent at school showed up yelling at her seven year old son about not having his things in order, a six year old girl softly whispered to me: - "This mother does not have a good day today. Maybe she needs a cup of coffee." This natural way of seeing the humanness, empathizing with others, is something that we can strengthen with attention and practice. And our children can be our teachers!

4. What are the most important personal characteristics of an individual that can contribute to non-violent communication?

Towe:

In general an awareness of attitude towards others, based on the simple and well known principle, "Treat others as you want to be treated yourself":

The ability to catch oneself in the moment when a communication is about to turn in to a violent exchange. To take "time-out", shut up and start to listen to the other person instead of contribute to escalating the aggressive energy.

5. NVC approach to communication emphasizes compassion as the motivation for action rather than fear, guilt, shame, blame, coercion, threat or justification for punishment. How do you suggest that an individual internalises it and how does this process develop?

Towe:

Through starting to listen to the inner dialogue about others and oneself. To literally start doing translation of the inner messages of guilt, shame, blame, coercion, threat and justification to feelings and needs. Gradually this work goes quicker and the selfknowledge and -understanding grows. The awareness of self responsibility also grows and the attitude towards others shifts to more of willingness to cooperate than use force.

Marianne:

The deepened listening to yourself is essential. I can see in my own learning process that I was taught to listen to others and to trust that they knew what was best for me. In that process I lost my connection to my own needs and my inner motivation. It has taken me quite some attention to regain my power to make choices with mutual respect for myself and others. To translate judgments into feelings and needs in the moment is a way of respecting life in me and around me.

6. In the invitation of the workshop it is written that with this approach we can create a quality of connection that gets everyone's needs met through compassionate giving.

What if we internalise this approach but have on the other side verbally violent person?
How can we get to the reciprocal relationship?

Towe:

To call a person "verbally violent" is in itself executing violence. NVC is based on the assumption that behind every action or statement there are feelings and needs, even if they are not expressed openly. If we on our side can keep our consciousness of this alive we can do the translation for this person. We do it loud or inside ourselves. If we at this moment can't reach the other person we can take care of ourselves and mourn our shortcoming.

Marianne:

I heard a situation when a 15 year old student said to a substitute teacher: "- I will not do what you propose because I am not respecting you as a person." That was a really challenging message for the teacher, also having a whole class with sharpened ears watching the conflict. She took some deep breaths and then she said: - Are you angry because you would like things to be as usual, and you do not recognize what I propose? This was a start of a meaningful dialogue about how to cooperation.

7. How do you think this approach can be promoted with kids? How can it be used also in private life, family? What should parents do at home and teachers at school?

Towe:

The same principles work everywhere. Parents and teachers have a particular mission to demonstrate values in relationship to their children since they really contribute to how children develop. The power of empathy which is a core quality in NVC has been undervalued in our society and parents in particular have a great opportunity to give this precious gift early to their children. That will help their children to grow up to empathic human beings.

8. What results do you notice after your workshops? DO you have any interesting story you could share with our readers?

Towe:

Most people say that the workshop was "interesting and really make sense". I have also heard "this is nonsense, no one can talk like that". Some people are very moved and want to learn more. The basic messages of NVC are very challenging to our programmed way of thinking. At the same time they touch something deep and they trigger a longing to live a more true life. Trying to live the NVC-principles doesn't make life easier, but more genuine.

Story: A fulltime working Mother of three told the group in the morning of our second day of a training that she the evening before went home and the only thing she said that night was "... and I would like you to....". "We haven't had a more peaceful evening in years", was her conclusion.

A boy of six was asked in a NVC-way to brush his teeth. "That is the way to talk with me", was his comment as he walked away in to the bathroom and started brushing. Kids mostly know what actions are best for them, they simply don't like the way they are ordered to do them.

Marianne:

Participants in workshops very often express that they get inspired and connected to hope from what we work on in the groups. In evaluations from trainings people report that they have increased understanding of themselves, clarity in conversations and improved listening skills as the most positive effects from the trainings.

9. What do you suggest should be the first step of an individual to change or complete his communication approach?

Towe:

There are some very easy steps to take as a start. Use some words as signals and translate them.

Examples are "I must....." translate that statement to "I choose to because I need....". "You have to....." to can be translated to "I would like you to.... are you willing?". When I say "I don't want to.....", can be translated to "I want to....."

To use my anger as a signal that is telling me that my needs are not met. The angrier I am the more vital is the unmet need. If I start looking at the need instead of blame the surrounding, I might find that under the anger there is fear or sadness.

Marianne:

I suggest that you start by asking yourself many times a day the questions: What do I feel? And what do I need? To raise the awareness of your inner life, your choices, and use it in communication to live mutual respect and understanding where you want.