

Remorse and Restorative Justice

By Susan Allan

In recent months, watching the news has offered a reminder of the extraordinary value of Nonviolent Communication® for many of us. As I absorb the verbiage that I hear and read, translating it as quickly as possible into Feelings and Needs language, I find great solace in memories of Marshall Rosenberg leading an IIT.

I was so fortunate that the first person who spoke during the first session was a woman who described dire circumstances that most of us would consider to be a call for social justice. This is seared into my memory because I wanted to fix her problem and as I was so new to NVC I hadn't yet realized that Marshall had discovered an entirely new way to think and communicate with people in grave distress. This is what I understood as Marshall gave her Empathy:

FEELINGS

NEEDS

She felt rage because

she needed financial fairness.

She felt angry because

she needed understanding.

She felt despair because

she needed to be heard.

She felt outrage because

she needed financial stability.

She felt desperate because

she needed support.

She felt hopeless because

she needed peace.

This is what I learned that day:

1. After Marshall had worked with her for some time, I raised my hand and offered the following, thinking that this would resolve the issue. Perhaps, like me, you have tried this! I said that I understood the financial situation and that she required enough resources to meet the needs of her family; she agreed.
2. Then I offered a solution that since all the attendees were there for 10 days and there were 4 meals being served to each of us every day and that since many of us required only 2 or 3 meals per day, I suggested that perhaps we could negotiate with the hotel and the cost of unwanted meals could be collected as a contribution to help resolve her financial short fall.

3. If you are a longtime student of Nonviolent Communication, then you already know that turned out!
 - A. Attempting to solve a problem before understanding the full extent of someone's Feelings and Needs doesn't work.
 - B. Attempting to jump in with any form of communication before someone has been fully heard doesn't work.
 - C. Assuming that someone needs us to solve their problem is very often erroneous.
 - D. If I had already mastered Self-empathy, I would have been able to remain calm and quiet until she had been fully heard, but of course the fact that I couldn't and didn't was a wonderful demonstration of what not to do.

The greatest gift that this woman received that week was Empathy from Marshall and after we observed him, we were amazed to see that she visibly shifted and told us how grateful and happy she was to have been heard. Her appearance had shifted, and she became a smiling relaxed person; she was beaming and loving.

I can tell you now that she was from a North American tribe and that she had suffered as so many tribal communities in North America have suffered and yet Empathy was what healed her; Marshall's calm presence and Empathy shifted everything!

Marshall didn't need to offer the remorse that so many of us feel due to the treatment of tribal communities in the United States and elsewhere. Empathy literally "trumps" Remorse!

Many years later I was in India at a meditation training and retreat at the same time as fifteen tribal chiefs and leaders from around the world. One of the tribal chiefs was in grave emotional distress because of life situations that were similar to those suffered by the woman attending the IIT. I had the remarkable opportunity to offer him Empathy during our various meetings on the campus and each time I saw him relax, I observed him becoming more present and more peaceful.

It's been wonderful for me to do my very best to channel Marshall as often as possible and to be sure to do so whenever my presence and Empathy can make a difference. I have been offering Self-empathy and Empathy to clients every day since that IIT and that is the key; practicing everywhere that one can, with everyone that we meet. When working with clients in order to support their goals in their intimate relationships, families and careers the key is Self-empathy and then Empathy and then Self-expression. This one tool has turned around so many marriages that had been headed to divorce. While our culture recommends feeling and expressing remorse and then making amends I have 20 years of evidence that feeling guilty isn't helpful at all and Empathy is the key to peace.