3

Observing Without Evaluating

OBSERVE!! There are few things as important, as religious, as that.
—Frederick Buechner, minister

I can handle your telling me
what I did or didn't do.
And I can handle your interpretations,
but please don't mix the two.

If you want to confuse any issue,
I can tell you how to do it:
Mix together what I do
with how you react to it.

Tell me that you're disappointed
with the unfinished chores you see,
But calling me "irresponsible"
is no way to motivate me.

And tell me that you're feeling hurt
when I say "no" to your advances,
But calling me a frigid man
won't increase your future chances.

Yes, I can handle your telling me
what I did or didn't do,
And I can handle your interpretations,
but please don't mix the two.

—Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

The first component of NVC entails the separation of observation from evaluation. We need to clearly observe what we are seeing, hearing, or touching that is affecting our sense of well-being, without mixing in any evaluation.

Observations are an important element in NVC, where we wish to clearly and honestly express how we are to another person. When we combine observation with evaluation, we decrease the likelihood that others will hear our intended message. Instead, they are apt to hear criticism and thus resist whatever we are saying.

NVC does not mandate that we remain completely objective and refrain from evaluating. It only requires that we maintain a separation between our observations and our evaluations. NVC is a process language that discourages static generalizations; instead, evaluations are to be based on observations *specific to time and context.* Semanticist Wendell Johnson pointed out that we create many problems for ourselves by using static language to express or capture a reality that is ever changing: "Our language is an imperfect instrument created by ancient and ignorant men. It is an animistic language that invites us to talk about stability and constants, about similarities and normal and kinds, about magical transformations, quick cures, simple problems, and final solutions. Yet the world we try to symbolize with this language is a world of process, change, differences, dimensions, functions, relationships, growths, interactions, developing, learning, coping, complexity. And the mismatch of our ever-changing world and our relatively static language forms is part of our problem."

When we combine observation with evaluation, people are apt to hear criticism.

A colleague of mine, Ruth Bebermeyer, contrasts static and process language in a song that illustrates the difference between evaluation and observation:

I've never seen a lazy man;
I've seen a man who never ran
while I watched him, and I've seen

a man who sometimes slept between
lunch and dinner, and who'd stay
at home upon a rainy day,
but he was not a lazy man.
Before you call me crazy,
think, was he a lazy man or
did he just do things we label "lazy"?

I've never seen a stupid kid;
I've seen a kid who sometimes did
things I didn't understand
or things in ways I hadn't planned;
I've seen a kid who hadn't seen
the same places where I had been,
but he was not a stupid kid.
Before you call him stupid,
think, was he a stupid kid or did he
just know different things than you did?

I've looked as hard as I can look
but never ever seen a cook;
I saw a person who combined
ingredients on which we dined,
A person who turned on the heat
and watched the stove that cooked the meat—
I saw those things but not a cook.
Tell me, when you're looking,
Is it a cook you see or is it someone
doing things that we call cooking?

What some of us call lazy
some call tired or easy-going,
what some of us call stupid
some just call a different knowing,
so I've come to the conclusion,
it will save us all confusion

if we don't mix up what we can see
with what is our opinion.
Because you may, I want to say also;
I know that's only my opinion.

—Ruth Bebermeyer

While the effects of negative labels such as "lazy" and "stupid" may be more obvious, even a positive or an apparently neutral label such as "cook" limits our perception of the totality of another person's being.

The Highest Form of Human Intelligence

The Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti once remarked that observing without evaluating is the highest form of human intelligence. When I first read this statement, the thought, "What nonsense!" shot through my mind before I realized that I had just made an evaluation. For most of us, it is difficult to make observations, especially of people and their behavior, that are free of judgment, criticism, or other forms of analysis.

I became acutely aware of this difficulty while working with an elementary school where the staff and principal had often reported communication difficulties. The district superintendent had requested that I help them resolve the conflict. First I was to confer with the staff, and then with the staff and principal together.

I opened the meeting by asking the staff, "What is the principal doing that conflicts with your needs?"

"He has a big mouth!" came the swift response. My question called for an observation, but while "big mouth" gave me information on how this teacher evaluated the principal, it failed to describe what the principal *said or did* that led to the interpretation that he had a "big mouth."

When I pointed this out, a second teacher offered, "I know what he means: the principal talks too much!" Instead of a clear observation of the principal's behavior, this was also an evaluation—of how much the principal talked. A third teacher then declared, "He thinks only he has anything worth saying." I explained that inferring what another person is thinking is not the same as observing his behavior. Finally a fourth teacher ventured, "He wants to be the center of attention all the time." After I remarked that this too was an inference—of what another person is wanting—two teachers blurted in unison, "Well, your question is very hard to answer!"

We subsequently worked together to create a list identifying *specific behaviors,* on the part of the principal, that bothered them, and made sure that the list was free of evaluation. For example, the principal told stories about his childhood and war experiences during faculty meetings, with the result that meetings sometimes ran twenty minutes overtime. When I asked whether they had ever communicated their annoyance to the principal, the staff replied that they had tried, but only through evaluative comments.

They had never made reference to specific behaviors—such as his storytelling—and they agreed to bring these up when we were all to meet together.

Almost as soon as the meeting began, I saw what the staff had been telling me. No matter what was being discussed, the principal would interject, "This reminds me of the time … " and then launch into a story about his childhood or war experience. I waited for the staff to voice their discomfort around the principal's behavior. However, instead of Nonviolent Communication, they applied nonverbal condemnation. Some rolled their eyes; others yawned pointedly; one stared at his watch.

I endured this painful scenario until finally I asked, "Isn't anyone going to say something?" An awkward silence ensued. The teacher who had spoken first at our meeting screwed up his courage, looked directly at the principal, and said, "Ed, you have a big mouth."

As this story illustrates, it's not always easy to shed our old habits and master the ability to separate observation from evaluation. Eventually, the teachers succeeded in clarifying for the principal the specific actions that led to their concern. The principal listened earnestly and then pressed, "Why didn't one of you tell me before?" He admitted he was aware of his storytelling habit, and then began a story pertaining to this habit! I interrupted him, observing (good-naturedly) that he was doing it again. We ended our meeting by developing ways for the staff to let their principal know, in a gentle way, when his stories weren't appreciated.

Distinguishing Observations From Evaluations

The following table distinguishes observations that are separate from evaluation from those that have evaluation mixed in.

Communication	Example of observation with evaluation mixed in	Example of observation separate from evaluation
1. Use of verb *to be* without indication that the evaluator takes responsibility for the evaluation	You are too generous.	When I see you give all your lunch money to others, I think you are being too generous.
2. Use of verbs with evaluative connotations	Doug procrastinates.	Doug only studies for exams the night before.
3. Implication that one's inferences about another person's thoughts, feelings, intentions, or desires are the only ones possible	She won't get her work in.	I don't think she'll get her work in. *or* She said, "I won't get my work in."
4. Confusion of prediction with certainty	If you don't eat balanced meals, your health will be impaired.	If you don't eat balanced meals, I fear your health may be impaired.
5. Failure to be specific about referents	Immigrants don't take care of their property.	I have not seen the immigrant family living at 1679 Ross shovel the snow on their sidewalk.
6. Use of words denoting ability without indicating that an evaluation is being made	Hank Smith is a poor soccer player.	Hank Smith has not scored a goal in twenty games.
7. Use of adverbs and adjectives in ways that do not indicate an evaluation has been made	Jim is ugly.	Jim's looks don't appeal to me.

Note: The words *always, never, ever, whenever,* etc. express observations when used in the following ways:

- Whenever I have observed Jack on the phone, he has spoken for at least thirty minutes.
- I cannot recall your ever writing to me.

Sometimes such words are used as exaggerations, in which case observations and evaluations are being mixed:

- You are always busy.
- She is never there when she's needed.

When these words are used as exaggerations, they often provoke defensiveness rather than compassion.

Words like *frequently* and *seldom* can also contribute to confusing observation with evaluation.

Evaluations	Observations
You seldom do what I want.	The last three times I initiated an activity, you said you didn't want to do it.
He frequently comes over.	He comes over at least three times a week.

Summary

The first component of NVC entails the separation of observation from evaluation. When we combine observation with evaluation, others are apt to hear criticism and resist what we are saying. NVC is a process language that discourages static generalizations. Instead, observations are to be made specific to time and context, for example, "Hank Smith has not scored a goal in twenty games," rather than "Hank Smith is a poor soccer player."

NVC in Action

"The Most Arrogant Speaker We've Ever Had!"

This dialogue occurred during a workshop I was conducting. About half an hour into my presentation, I paused to invite reactions from the participants. One of them raised a hand and declared, "You're the most arrogant speaker we've ever had!"

I have several options open to me when people address me this way. One option is to take the message personally; I know I'm doing this when I have a strong urge to either grovel, defend myself, or make excuses. Another option (for which I am well-rehearsed) is to attack the other person for what I perceive as their attack upon me. On this occasion, I chose a third option by focusing on what might be going on behind the man's statement.

MBR: *(guessing at the observations being made)* Are you reacting to my having taken thirty straight minutes to present my views before giving you a chance to talk?

Phil: No, you make it sound so simple.

MBR: *(trying to obtain further clarification)* Are you reacting to my not having said anything about how the process can be difficult for some people to apply?

Phil: No, not some people—you!

MBR: So you're reacting to my not having said that the process can be difficult for me at times? Phil: That's right.

MBR: Are you feeling annoyed because you would have liked some sign from me that indicated that I have some problems with the process myself?

Phil: *(after a moment's pause)* That's right.

MBR: *(feeling more relaxed now that I am in touch with the person's feeling and need, I direct my attention to what he might be requesting of me)* Would you like me to admit right now that this process can be a struggle for me to apply?

Phil: Yes.

MBR: *(having gotten clear on his observation, feeling, need, and request, I check inside myself to see if I am willing to do as he requests)* Yes, this process is often difficult for me. As we continue with the workshop, you'll probably hear me describe several incidents where I've struggled … or completely lost touch … with this process, this consciousness, that I am presenting here to you. But what keeps me in the struggle are the close connections to other people that happen when I do stay with the process.

Exercise 1

OBSERVATION OR EVALUATION?

To determine your proficiency at discerning between observations and evaluations, complete the following exercise. Circle the number in front of each statement that is an observation only, with no evaluation mixed in.

1. "John was angry with me yesterday for no reason."
2. "Yesterday evening Nancy bit her fingernails while watching television."
3. "Sam didn't ask for my opinion during the meeting."
4. "My father is a good man."
5. "Janice works too much."
6. "Henry is aggressive."
7. "Pam was first in line every day this week."
8. "My son often doesn't brush his teeth."
9. "Luke told me I didn't look good in yellow."
10. "My aunt complains when I talk with her."

Here are my responses for Exercise 1:

1. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "for no reason" to be an evaluation. Furthermore, I consider it an evaluation to infer that John was angry. He might have been feeling hurt, scared, sad, or something else. Examples of observations without evaluation might be: "John told me he was angry," or "John pounded his fist on the table."
2. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that an observation was expressed without being mixed together with an evaluation.
3. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that an observation was expressed without being mixed together with an evaluation.
4. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "good man" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be:

"For the last twenty-five years, my father has given one-tenth of his salary to charity."

5. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "too much" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be: "Janice spent more than sixty hours at the office this week."
6. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "aggressive" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be: "Henry hit his sister when she switched the television channel."
7. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that an observation was expressed without being mixed together with an evaluation.
8. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "often" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be: "Twice this week my son didn't brush his teeth before going to bed."
9. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that an observation was expressed without being mixed together with an evaluation.
10. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "complains" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be: "My aunt called me three times this week, and each time talked about people who treated her in ways she didn't like."

The Mask

Always a mask
Held in the slim hand whitely
Always she had a mask before her
face—

Truly the wrist
Holding it lightly
Fitted the task:
Sometimes however
Was there a shiver,
Fingertip quiver,
Ever so slightly—
Holding the mask?

For years and years and years I
wondered
But dared not ask
And then—
I blundered,
Looked behind the mask,
To find
Nothing—

She had no face.
She had become
Merely a hand
Holding a mask
With grace.

—Author unknown

4

Identifying and Expressing Feelings

The first component of NVC is to observe without evaluating; the second component is to express how we are feeling. Psychoanalyst Rollo May suggests that "the mature person becomes able to differentiate feelings into as many nuances, strong and passionate experiences, or delicate and sensitive ones as in the different passages of music in a symphony." For many of us, however, our feelings are, as May would describe it, "limited like notes in a bugle call."

The Heavy Cost of Unexpressed Feelings

Our repertoire of words for calling people names is often larger than our vocabulary of words to clearly describe our emotional states. I went through twenty-one years of American schools and can't recall anyone in all that time ever asking me how I felt. Feelings were simply not considered important. What was valued was "the right way to think"—as defined by those who held positions of rank and authority. We are trained to be "other-directed" rather than to be in contact with ourselves. We learn to be "up in our head," wondering, "What is it that others think is right for me to say and do?"

An interaction I had with a teacher when I was about nine years old demonstrates how alienation from our feelings can begin. I once hid myself in a classroom after school because some boys were waiting outside to beat me up. A teacher spotted me and asked me to leave the school. When I explained I was afraid to go, she declared, "Big boys don't get frightened." A few years later I received further reinforcement through my participation in athletics. It was typical for coaches to value athletes willing to "give their all" and continue playing no matter how much physical pain they were in. I learned the lesson so well I once continued playing baseball for a month with an untreated broken wrist.

At an NVC workshop, a college student spoke about being kept awake by a roommate who played the stereo late at night and loudly. When asked to express what he felt when this happened, the student replied, "I feel that it isn't right to play music so loud at night." I pointed out that when he followed the word *feel* with the word *that,* he was expressing an opinion but not revealing his feelings. Asked to try again to express his feelings, he responded, "I feel, when people do something like that, it's a personality disturbance." I explained that this was still an opinion rather than a feeling. He paused thoughtfully, and then announced with vehemence, "I have no feelings about it whatsoever!"

This student obviously had strong feelings. Unfortunately, he didn't know how to become aware of his feelings, let alone express them. This difficulty in identifying and expressing feelings is common, and in my experience, especially so among lawyers, engineers, police officers, corporate

managers, and career military personnel—people whose professional codes discourage them from manifesting emotions. For families, the toll is severe when members are unable to communicate emotions. Country singer Reba McEntire wrote a song after her father's death, and titled it "The Greatest Man I Never Knew." In so doing, she undoubtedly expressed the sentiments of many people who were never able to establish the emotional connection they would have liked with their fathers.

I regularly hear statements like, "I wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea—I'm married to a wonderful man—but I never know what he is feeling." One such dissatisfied woman brought her spouse to a workshop, during which she told him, "I feel like I'm married to a wall." The husband then did an excellent imitation of a wall: he sat mute and immobile. Exasperated, she turned to me and exclaimed, "See! This is what happens all the time. He sits and says nothing. It's just like living with a wall."

"It sounds to me like you are feeling lonely and wanting more emotional contact with your husband," I responded. When she agreed, I tried to show how statements such as "I feel like I'm living with a wall" are unlikely to bring her feelings and desires to her husband's attention. In fact, they are more likely to be heard as criticism than as invitations to connect with our feelings. Furthermore, such statements often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. A husband, for example, hears himself criticized for behaving like a wall; he is hurt and discouraged and doesn't respond, thereby confirming his wife's image of him as a wall.

The benefits of strengthening our feelings vocabulary are evident not only in intimate relationships but also in the professional world. I was once hired to consult with members of a technological department of a large Swiss corporation; they were troubled by the discovery that workers in other departments were avoiding them. When asked, employees from other departments responded, "We hate going there to consult with those people. It's like talking to a bunch of machines!" The problem abated when I spent time with the members of the technological department, encouraging them to express more of their humanness in their communications with co-workers.

In another instance, I was working with hospital administrators who were anxious about a forthcoming meeting with the hospital's physicians. The administrators were eager to have me demonstrate how they might use

NVC when approaching the physicians for support for a project that had only recently been turned down by a vote of 17 to 1.

Assuming the voice of an administrator in a role-playing session, I opened with, "I'm feeling frightened to be bringing up this issue." I chose to start this way because I sensed how frightened the administrators were as they prepared to confront the physicians on this topic again. Before I could continue, one of the administrators stopped me to protest, "You're being unrealistic! We could never tell the physicians that we were frightened."

When I asked why an admission of fear seemed so impossible, he replied without hesitation, "If we admitted we're frightened, then they would just pick us to pieces!" His answer didn't surprise me; I have often heard people say they cannot imagine ever expressing feelings at their workplace. I was pleased to learn, however, that one of the administrators did decide to risk expressing his vulnerability at the dreaded meeting. Departing from his customary manner of appearing strictly logical, rational, and unemotional, he chose to state his feelings together with his reasons for wanting the physicians to change their position. He noticed how differently the physicians responded to him. In the end he was amazed and relieved when, instead of "picking him to pieces," the physicians reversed their previous position and voted 17 to 1 to support the project instead. This dramatic turn-around helped the administrators realize and appreciate the potential impact of expressing vulnerability—even in the workplace.

Expressing our vulnerability can help resolve conflicts.

Finally, let me share a personal incident that taught me the effects of hiding our feelings. I was teaching a course in NVC to a group of inner city students. When I walked into the room the first day, the students, who had been enjoying a lively conversation with each other, became quiet. "Good morning!" I greeted. Silence. I felt very uncomfortable, but was afraid to express it. Instead, I proceeded in my most professional manner: "For this class, we will be studying a process of communication that I hope you will find helpful in your relationships at home and with your friends."

I continued to present information about NVC, but no one seemed to be listening. One girl, rummaging through her bag, fished out a file and began

vigorously filing her nails. Students near the windows glued their faces to the panes as if fascinated by what was going on in the street below. I felt increasingly more uncomfortable, yet continued to say nothing about it. Finally, a student who had certainly more courage than I was demonstrating, piped up, "You just hate being with black people, don't you?" I was stunned, yet immediately realized how I had contributed to this student's perception by trying to hide my discomfort.

"I *am* feeling nervous," I admitted, "but not because you are black. My feelings have to do with my not knowing anyone here and wanting to be accepted when I came in the room." My expression of vulnerability had a pronounced effect on the students. They started to ask questions about me, to tell me things about themselves, and to express curiosity about NVC.

Feelings versus Non-Feelings

A common confusion, generated by the English language, is our use of the word *feel* without actually expressing a feeling. For example, in the sentence, "I feel I didn't get a fair deal," the words *I feel* could be more accurately replaced with *I think*. In general, feelings are not being clearly expressed when the word *feel* is followed by:

1. Words such as *that, like, as if:*
   "I feel *that* you should know better."
   "I feel *like* a failure."
   "I feel *as if* I'm living with a wall."
2. The pronouns I, you, he, she, *they, it:*
   "I feel *I* am constantly on call."
   "I feel *it* is useless."
3. Names or nouns referring to people:
   "I feel *Amy* has been pretty responsible."
   "I feel *my boss* is being manipulative."

Distinguish feelings from thoughts.

Conversely, in the English language, it is not necessary to use the word *feel* at all when we are actually expressing a feeling: we can say, "I'm feeling irritated," or simply, "I'm irritated."

Distinguish between what we feel and what we think we are.

In NVC, we distinguish between words that express actual feelings and those that describe *what we think we are.*

1. Description of what we *think* we are:
   "I feel *inadequate* as a guitar player."

In this statement, I am assessing my ability as a guitar player, rather than clearly expressing my feelings.

2. Expressions of actual feelings:
   "I feel *disappointed* in myself as a guitar player."
   "I feel *impatient* with myself as a guitar player."
   "I feel *frustrated* with myself as a guitar player."
   The actual feeling behind my assessment of myself as "inadequate" could therefore be disappointment, impatience, frustration, or some other emotion.

Likewise, it is helpful to differentiate between words that describe what we think others are doing around us, and words that describe actual feelings. The following are examples of statements that are easily mistaken as expressions of feelings: in fact they reveal more *how we think others are behaving* than what we are actually feeling ourselves.

Distinguish between what we feel and how we think others react or behave toward us.

1. "I feel *unimportant* to the people with whom I work."
   The word *unimportant* describes how I think others are evaluating me, rather than an actual feeling, which in this situation might be "I feel *sad*" or "I feel *discouraged.*"
2. "I feel *misunderstood.*"
   Here the word *misunderstood* indicates my assessment of the other person's level of understanding rather than an actual feeling. In this situation, I may be feeling *anxious* or *annoyed* or some other emotion.
3. 3. "I feel *ignored.*"
   Again, this is more of an interpretation of the actions of others than a clear statement of how we are feeling. No doubt there have been times we thought we were being ignored and our feeling was *relief,* because we wanted to be left to ourselves. No doubt there were other times, however, when we felt *hurt* when we thought we were being ignored, because we had wanted to be involved.

Words like *ignored* express how we *interpret others,* rather than how we *feel.* Here is a sampling of such words:

abandoned
abused
attacked
betrayed
boxed-in
bullied
cheated
coerced
co-opted
cornered
diminished
distrusted
interrupted
intimidated
let down
manipulated
misunderstood
neglected
overworked
patronized
pressured
provoked
put down
rejected
taken for granted
threatened
unappreciated
unheard
unseen
unsupported
unwanted
used

Building a Vocabulary for Feelings

In expressing our feelings, it helps to use words that refer to specific emotions, rather than words that are vague or general. For example, if we say, "I feel good about that," the word *good* could mean happy, excited, relieved, or a number of other emotions. Words such as *good* and *bad* prevent the listener from connecting easily with what we might actually be feeling.

The following lists have been compiled to help you increase your power to articulate feelings and clearly describe a whole range of emotional states.

How we are likely to feel when our needs <u>are</u> being met

absorbed
adventurous
affectionate
alert
alive
amazed
amused
animated
appreciative
ardent
aroused
astonished
blissful
breathless
buoyant
calm
carefree
cheerful
comfortable
complacent
composed
concerned
confident

contented
cool
curious
dazzled
delighted
eager
ebullient
ecstatic
effervescent
elated
enchanted
encouraged
energetic
engrossed
enlivened
enthusiastic
excited
exhilarated
expansive
expectant
exultant
fascinated
free
friendly
fulfilled
glad
gleeful
glorious
glowing
good-humored
grateful
gratified
happy
helpful
hopeful
inquisitive

inspired
intense
interested
intrigued
invigorated
involved
joyous, joyful
jubilant
keyed-up
loving
mellow
merry
mirthful
moved
optimistic
overjoyed
overwhelmed
peaceful
perky
pleasant
pleased
proud
quiet
radiant
rapturous
refreshed
relaxed
relieved
satisfied
secure
sensitive
serene
spellbound
splendid
stimulated
surprised

tender
thankful
thrilled
touched
tranquil
trusting
upbeat
warm
wide-awake
wonderful
zestful

How we are likely to feel when our needs are not being met

afraid
aggravated
agitated
alarmed
aloof
angry
anguished
annoyed
anxious
apathetic
apprehensive
aroused
ashamed
beat
bewildered
bitter
blah
blue bored
brokenhearted
chagrined
cold
concerned
confused

cool
cross
dejected
depressed
despairing
despondent
detached
disaffected
disappointed
discouraged
disenchanted
disgruntled
disgusted
disheartened
dismayed
displeased
disquieted
distressed
disturbed
downcast
downhearted
dull
edgy
embarrassed
embittered
exasperated
exhausted
fatigued
fearful
fidgety
forlorn
frightened
frustrated
furious
gloomy
guilty

harried
heavy
helpless
hesitant
horrible
horrified
hostile
hot
humdrum
hurt
impatient
indifferent
intense
irate
irked
irritated
jealous
jittery
keyed-up
lazy
leery
lethargic
listless
lonely
mad
mean
miserable
mopey
morose
mournful
nervous
nettled
numb
overwhelmed
panicky
passive

perplexed
pessimistic
puzzled
rancorous
reluctant
repelled
resentful
restless
sad
scared
sensitive
shaky
shocked
skeptical
sleepy
sorrowful
sorry
spiritless
startled
surprised
suspicious
tepid
terrified
tired
troubled
uncomfortable
unconcerned
uneasy
unglued
unhappy
unnerved
unsteady
upset
uptight
vexed
weary

wistful
withdrawn
woeful
worried
wretched

Summary

The second component necessary for expressing ourselves is feelings. By developing a vocabulary of feelings that allows us to clearly and specifically name or identify our emotions, we can connect more easily with one another. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable by expressing our feelings can help resolve conflicts. NVC distinguishes the expression of actual feelings from words and statements that describe thoughts, assessments, and interpretations.

Exercise 2

EXPRESSING FEELINGS

If you would like to see whether we're in agreement about the verbal expression of feelings, circle the number in front of each of the following statements in which feelings are verbally expressed.

1. "I feel you don't love me."
2. "I'm sad that you're leaving."
3. "I feel scared when you say that."
4. "When you don't greet me, I feel neglected."
5. "I'm happy that you can come."
6. "You're disgusting."
7. "I feel like hitting you."
8. "I feel misunderstood."
9. "I feel good about what you did for me."
10. "I'm worthless."

Here are my responses for Exercise 2:

1. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I don't consider "you don't love me" to be a feeling. To me, it expresses what the speaker thinks the other person is feeling, rather than how the speaker is feeling. Whenever the words *I feel* are followed by the words I, you, he, she, *they, it, that, like,* or *as if,* what follows is generally not what I would consider to be a feeling. An expression of feeling in this case might be: "I'm sad," or "I'm feeling anguished."
2. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that a feeling was verbally expressed.
3. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that a feeling was verbally expressed.

4. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I don't consider "neglected" to be a feeling. To me, it expresses what the speaker thinks the other person is doing to him or her. An expression of feeling might be: "When you don't greet me at the door, I feel lonely."
5. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that a feeling was verbally expressed.
6. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I don't consider "disgusting" to be a feeling. To me, it expresses how the speaker thinks about the other person, rather than how the speaker is feeling. An expression of feeling might be: "I feel disgusted."
7. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I don't consider "like hitting you" to be a feeling. To me, it expresses what the speaker imagines doing, rather than how the speaker is feeling. An expression of feeling might be: "I am furious at you."
8. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I don't consider "misunderstood" to be a feeling. To me, it expresses what the speaker thinks the other person is doing. An expression of feeling in this case might be: "I feel frustrated," or "I feel discouraged."
9. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that a feeling was verbally expressed. However, the word *good* is vague when used to convey a feeling. We can usually express our feelings more clearly by using other words, for example: *relieved, gratified,* or *encouraged.*
10. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I don't consider "worthless" to be a feeling. To me, it expresses how the speaker thinks about himself or herself, rather than how the speaker is feeling. An expression of feeling in this case might be: "I feel skeptical about my own talents," or "I feel wretched."

5

Taking Responsibility for Our Feelings

People are disturbed not by things, but by the view they take of them.
—Epictetus

Hearing a Negative Message: Four Options

The third component of NVC entails the acknowledgment of the root of our feelings. NVC heightens our awareness that what others say and do may be the *stimulus,* but never the *cause,* of our feelings. We see that our feelings result from how we *choose* to receive what others say and do, as well as from our particular needs and expectations in that moment. With this third component, we are led to accept responsibility for what we do to generate our own feelings.

What others do may be the stimulus of our feelings, but not the cause.

When someone gives us a negative message, whether verbally or nonverbally, we have four options as to how to receive it. One option is to take it personally by hearing blame and criticism. For example, someone is angry and says, "You're the most self-centered person I've ever met!" If choosing to take it personally, we might react: "Oh, I should've been more sensitive!" We accept the other person's judgment and blame ourselves. We choose this option at great cost to our self-esteem, for it inclines us toward feelings of guilt, shame, and depression.

Four options for receiving negative messages: 1. blame ourselves.

A second option is to fault the speaker. For example, in response to "You're the most self-centered person I've ever met," we might protest: "You have no right to say that! I am always considering your needs. You're the one who is really self-centered." When we receive messages this way, and blame the speaker, we are likely to feel anger.

2. blame others.

When receiving negative messages, our third option would be to shine the light of consciousness on our own feelings and needs. Thus, we might reply, "When I hear you say that I am the most self-centered person you've ever met, I feel hurt, because I need some recognition of my efforts to be considerate of your preferences." By focusing attention on our own feelings and needs, we become conscious that our current feeling of hurt derives from a need for our efforts to be recognized.

3. sense our own feelings and needs.

Finally, a fourth option on receiving a negative message is to shine the light of consciousness on the *other* person's feelings and needs as they are currently expressed. We might for example ask, "Are you feeling hurt because you need more consideration for your preferences?"

4. sense others' feelings and needs.

We accept responsibility for our feelings, rather than blame other people, by acknowledging our own needs, desires, expectations, values, or thoughts. Note the difference between the following expressions of disappointment:

Example 1

A: "You disappointed me by not coming over last evening."

B: "I was disappointed when you didn't come over, because I wanted to talk over some things that were bothering me."

Speaker A attributes responsibility for his disappointment solely to another person's action. Speaker B traces his feeling of disappointment to his own unfulfilled desire.

Example 2

A: "Their cancelling the contract really irritated me!"

B: "When they cancelled the contract, I felt really irritated because I was thinking to myself that it was an awfully irresponsible thing to do."

Speaker A attributes her irritation solely to the behavior of the other party, whereas Speaker B accepts responsibility for her feeling by acknowledging the thought behind it. She recognizes that her blaming way of thinking has generated her irritation. In NVC, however, we would urge this speaker to go a step further by identifying what she is wanting: what need, desire, expectation, hope, or value of hers has not been fulfilled? As we shall see, the more we are able to connect our feelings to our own needs, the easier it is for others to respond compassionately. To relate her feelings to what she is wanting, Speaker B might have said: "When they cancelled the contract, I felt really irritated because I was hoping for an opportunity to rehire the workers we laid off last year."

It is helpful to recognize a number of common speech patterns that tend to mask accountability for our own feelings:

1. Use of impersonal pronouns such as *it* and *that:*
   "It really infuriates me when spelling mistakes appear in our public brochures." "That bugs me a lot."
2. The use of the expression "I feel (an emotion) because … " followed by a person or personal pronoun other than *I*:
   "I feel hurt because you said you don't love me." "I feel angry because the supervisor broke her promise."
3. Statements that mention only the actions of others:
   "When you don't call me on my birthday, I feel hurt." "Mommy is disappointed when you don't finish your food."

In each of these instances, we can deepen our awareness of our own responsibility by substituting the phrase, "I feel … because I … " For example:

Connect your feeling with your need: "I feel … because I need …"

1. "I *feel* really infuriated when spelling mistakes like that appear in our public brochures, *because I* want our company to project a professional image."

2. "*I feel* angry that the supervisor broke her promise, *because I* was counting on getting that long weekend to visit my brother."
3. "*Mommy feels* disappointed when you don't finish your food, *because I* want you to grow up strong and healthy."

The basic mechanism of motivating by guilt is to attribute the responsibility for one's own feelings to others. When parents say, "It hurts Mommy and Daddy when you get poor grades at school," they are implying that the child's actions are the cause of the parents' happiness or unhappiness. On the surface, taking responsibility for the feelings of others can easily be mistaken for positive caring. It may appear that the child cares for the parent and feels bad because the parent is suffering. However, if children who assume this kind of responsibility change their behavior in accordance with parental wishes, they are not acting from the heart, but acting to avoid guilt.

Distinguish between giving from the heart and being motivated by guilt.

The Needs at the Roots of Feelings

Judgments, criticisms, diagnoses, and interpretations of others are all alienated expressions of our needs. If someone says, "You never understand me," they are really telling us that their need to be understood is not being fulfilled. If a wife says, "You've been working late every night this week; you love your work more than you love me," she is saying that her need for intimacy is not being met.

> **Judgments of others are alienated expressions of our own unmet needs.**

When we express our needs indirectly through the use of evaluations, interpretations, and images, others are likely to hear criticism. And when people hear anything that sounds like criticism, they tend to invest their energy in self-defense or counterattack. If we wish for a compassionate response from others, it is self-defeating to express our needs by interpreting or diagnosing their behavior. Instead, the more directly we can connect our feelings to our own needs, the easier it is for others to respond to us compassionately.

> **If we express our needs, we have a better chance of getting them met.**

Unfortunately, most of us have never been taught to think in terms of needs. We are accustomed to thinking about what's wrong with other people when our needs aren't being fulfilled. Thus, if we want coats to be hung up in the closet, we may characterize our children as lazy for leaving them on the couch. Or we may interpret our co-workers as irresponsible when they don't go about their tasks the way we would prefer them to.

I was once invited to Southern California to mediate between some landowners and migrant farm workers whose conflicts had grown increasingly hostile and violent. I began the meeting by asking these two

questions: “What is it that you are each needing? And what would you like to request of the other in relation to these needs?”

“The problem is that these people are racist!” shouted a farm worker. “The problem is that these people don’t respect law and order!” shouted a landowner even more loudly. As is often the case, these groups were more skilled in analyzing the perceived wrongness of others than in clearly expressing their own needs.

In a comparable situation, I once met with a group of Israelis and Palestinians who wanted to establish the mutual trust necessary to bring peace to their homelands. I opened the session with the same questions, “What is it you are needing and what would you like to request from one another in relation to those needs?” Instead of directly stating his needs, a Palestinian mukhtar (who is like a village mayor) answered, “You people are acting like a bunch of Nazis.” A statement like that is not likely to get the cooperation of a group of Israelis! Almost immediately, an Israeli woman jumped up and countered, “Mukhtar, that was a totally insensitive thing for you to say!”

Here were people who had come together to build trust and harmony, but after only one interchange, matters were worse than before they began. This happens often when people are used to analyzing and blaming one another rather than clearly expressing what they need. In this case, the woman could have responded to the mukhtar in terms of her own needs and requests by saying, for example, “I am needing more respect in our dialogue. Instead of telling us how you think we are acting, would you tell us what it is we are doing that you find disturbing?”

It has been my experience over and over again that from the moment people begin talking about what they need rather than what’s wrong with one another, the possibility of finding ways to meet everybody’s needs is greatly increased. The following are some of the basic human needs we all share:

Autonomy

- to choose one’s dreams, goals, values
- to choose one’s plan for fulfilling one’s dreams, goals, values

Celebration

- to celebrate the creation of life and dreams fulfilled
- to celebrate losses: loved ones, dreams, etc. (mourning)

Integrity
- authenticity
- creativity
- meaning
- self-worth

Interdependence
- acceptance
- appreciation
- closeness
- community
- consideration
- contribution to the enrichment of life (to exercise one's power by giving that which contributes to life)
- emotional safety
- empathy
- honesty (the empowering honesty that enables us to learn from our limitations)
- love
- reassurance
- respect
- support
- trust
- understanding
- warmth

Play
- fun
- laughter

Spiritual Communion
- beauty
- harmony

- inspiration
- order
- peace

Physical Nurturance

- air
- food
- movement, exercise
- protection from life-threatening forms of life: viruses, bacteria, insects, predatory animals
- rest
- sexual expression
- shelter
- touch
- water

The Pain of Expressing Our Needs versus the Pain of Not Expressing Our Needs

In a world where we're often judged harshly for identifying and revealing our needs, doing so can be very frightening. Women, in particular, are susceptible to criticism. For centuries, the image of the loving woman has been associated with sacrifice and the denial of one's own needs to take care of others. Because women are socialized to view the caretaking of others as their highest duty, they often learn to ignore their own needs.

At one workshop, we discussed what happens to women who internalize such beliefs. These women, if they ask for what they want, will often do so in a way that both reflects and reinforces the beliefs that they have no genuine right to their needs and that their needs are unimportant. For example, because she is fearful of asking for what she needs, a woman may fail to simply say that she's had a busy day, is feeling tired, and wants some time in the evening to herself; instead, her words come out sounding like a legal case: "You know I haven't had a moment to myself all day. I ironed all the shirts, did the whole week's laundry, took the dog to the vet, made dinner, packed the lunches, and called all the neighbors about the block meeting, so [imploringly] … so how about if you … ?"

"No!" comes the swift response. Her plaintive request elicits resistance rather than compassion from her listeners. They have difficulty hearing and valuing the needs behind her pleas, and furthermore react negatively to her weak attempt to argue from a position of what she "should" get or "deserves" to get from them. In the end the speaker is again persuaded that her needs don't matter, not realizing that they were expressed in a way unlikely to draw a positive response.

My mother was once at a workshop where other women were discussing how frightening it was to be expressing their needs. Suddenly she got up and left the room, and didn't return for a long time. She finally reappeared, looking very pale. In the presence of the group, I asked, "Mother, are you all right?"

If we don't value our needs, others may not either.

"Yes," she answered, "but I just had a sudden realization that's very hard for me to take in."

"What's that?"

"I've just become aware that for thirty-six years, I was angry with your father for not meeting my needs, and now I realize that I never once clearly told him what I needed."

My mother's revelation was accurate. Not one time, that I can remember, did she clearly express her needs to my father. She'd hint around and go through all kinds of convolutions, but never would she ask directly for what she needed.

We tried to understand why it was so hard for her to have done so. My mother grew up in an economically impoverished family. She recalled asking for things as a child and being admonished by her brothers and sisters, "You shouldn't ask for that! You know we're poor. Do you think you are the only person in the family?" Eventually she grew to fear that asking for what she needed would only lead to disapproval and judgment.

She related a childhood anecdote about one of her sisters who had had an appendix operation and afterwards had been given a beautiful little purse by another sister. My mother was fourteen at the time. Oh, how she yearned to have an exquisitely beaded purse like her sister's, but she dared not open her mouth. So guess what? She feigned a pain in her side and went the whole way with her story. Her family took her to several doctors. They were unable to produce a diagnosis and so opted for exploratory surgery. It had been a bold gamble on my mother's part, but it worked—she was given an identical little purse! When she received the coveted purse, my mother was elated despite being in physical agony from the surgery. Two nurses came in and one stuck a thermometer in her mouth. My mother said, "Ummm, ummm," to show the purse to the second nurse, who answered, "Oh, for me? Why, thank you!" and took the purse! My mother was at a loss, and never figured out how to say, "I didn't mean to give it to you. Please return it to me." Her story poignantly reveals how painful it can be when people don't openly acknowledge their needs.

From Emotional Slavery to Emotional Liberation

In our development toward a state of emotional liberation, most of us experience three stages in the way we relate to others.

Stage 1: In this stage, which I refer to as *emotional slavery,* we believe ourselves responsible for the feelings of others. We think we must constantly strive to keep everyone happy. If they don't appear happy, we feel responsible and compelled to do something about it. This can easily lead us to see the very people who are closest to us as burdens.

Taking responsibility for the feelings of others can be very detrimental to intimate relationships. I routinely hear variations on the following theme: "I'm really scared to be in a relationship. Every time I see my partner in pain or needing something, I feel overwhelmed. I feel like I'm in prison, that I'm being smothered—and I just have to get out of the relationship as fast as possible." This response is common among those who experience love as denial of one's own needs in order to attend to the needs of the beloved. In the early days of a relationship, partners typically relate joyfully and compassionately to each other out of a sense of freedom. The relationship is exhilarating, spontaneous, wonderful. Eventually, however, as the relationship becomes "serious," partners may begin to assume responsibility for each other's feelings.

First stage: Emotional slavery. We see ourselves responsible for others' feelings.

If I were a partner who is conscious of doing this, I might acknowledge the situation by explaining, "I can't bear it when I lose myself in relationships. When I see my partner's pain, I lose me, and then I just have to break free." However, if I have not reached this level of awareness, I am likely to blame my partner for the deterioration of the relationship. Thus I might say, "My partner is so needy and dependent it's really stressing out our relationship."

In such a case, my partner would do well to reject the notion that there is anything wrong with her needs. It would only make a bad situation worse to

accept that blame. Instead, she could offer an empathic response to the pain of my emotional slavery: "So you find yourself in panic. It's very hard for you to hold on to the deep caring and love we've had without turning it into a responsibility, duty, obligation…. You sense your freedom closing down because you think you constantly have to take care of me." If, however, instead of an empathic response, she says, "Are you feeling tense because I have been making too many demands on you?" then both of us are likely to stay enmeshed in emotional slavery, making it that much more difficult for the relationship to survive.

Stage 2: In this stage, we become aware of the high costs of assuming responsibility for others' feelings and trying to accommodate them at our own expense. When we notice how much of our lives we've missed and how little we have responded to the call of our own soul, we may get angry. I refer jokingly to this stage as the *obnoxious stage* because we tend toward obnoxious comments like, "That's *your* problem! *I'm* not responsible for your feelings!" when presented with another person's pain. We are clear what we are not responsible *for,* but have yet to learn how to be responsible *to* others in a way that is not emotionally enslaving.

Second stage: The obnoxious stage. We feel angry; we no longer want to be responsible for others' feelings.

As we emerge from the stage of emotional slavery, we may continue to carry remnants of fear and guilt around having our own needs. Thus it is not surprising that we end up expressing our needs in ways that sound rigid and unyielding to the ears of others. For example, during a break in one of my workshops, a young woman expressed appreciation for the insights she'd gained into her own state of emotional enslavement. When the workshop resumed, I suggested an activity to the group. The same young woman then declared assertively, "I'd rather do something else." I sensed she was exercising her newfound right to express her needs—even if they ran counter to those of others.

To encourage her to sort out what she wanted, I asked, "Do you want to do something else even if it conflicts with my needs?" She thought for a moment, and then stammered, "Yes…. er … I mean, no." Her confusion

reflects how, in the obnoxious stage, we have yet to grasp that emotional liberation entails more than simply asserting our own needs.

I recall an incident during my daughter Marla's passage toward emotional liberation. She had always been the "perfect little girl" who denied her own needs to comply with the wishes of others. When I became aware of how frequently she suppressed her own desires in order to please others, I talked to her about how I'd enjoy hearing her express her needs more often. When we first broached the subject, Marla cried. "But, Daddy, I don't want to disappoint anybody!" she protested helplessly. I tried to show Marla how her honesty would be a gift more precious to others than accommodating them to prevent their upset. I also clarified ways she could empathize with people when they were upset without taking responsibility for their feelings.

A short time later, I saw evidence that my daughter was beginning to express her needs more openly. A call came from her school principal, apparently disturbed by a communication he'd had with Marla, who had arrived at school wearing overalls. "Marla," he'd said, "young women do not dress this way." To which Marla had responded, "Bug off!"

Hearing this was cause for celebration: Marla had graduated from emotional slavery to obnoxiousness! She was learning to express her needs and risk dealing with the displeasure of others. Surely she had yet to assert her needs comfortably and in a way that respected the needs of others, but I trusted this would occur in time.

Stage 3: At the third stage, *emotional liberation,* we respond to the needs of others out of compassion, never out of fear, guilt, or shame. Our actions are therefore fulfilling to us, as well as to those who receive our efforts. We accept full responsibility for our own intentions and actions, but not for the feelings of others. At this stage, we are aware that we can never meet our own needs at the expense of others. Emotional liberation involves stating clearly what we need in a way that communicates we are equally concerned that the needs of others be fulfilled. NVC is designed to support us in relating at this level.

Third stage: Emotional liberation. We take responsibility for our intentions and actions.

Summary

The third component of NVC is the acknowledgment of the needs behind our feelings. What others say and do may be the stimulus for, but never the cause of, our feelings. When someone communicates negatively, we have four options as to how to receive the message: (1) blame ourselves, (2) blame others, (3) sense our own feelings and needs, (4) sense the feelings and needs hidden in the other person's negative message.

Judgments, criticisms, diagnoses, and interpretations of others are all alienated expressions of our own needs and values. When others hear criticism, they tend to invest their energy in self-defense or counterattack. The more directly we can connect our feelings to our needs, the easier it is for others to respond compassionately.

In a world where we are often harshly judged for identifying and revealing our needs, doing so can be very frightening, especially for women who are socialized to ignore their own needs while caring for others.

In the course of developing emotional responsibility, most of us experience three stages: (1) "emotional slavery"—believing ourselves responsible for the feelings of others, (2) "the obnoxious stage"—in which we refuse to admit to caring what anyone else feels or needs, and (3) "emotional liberation"—in which we accept full responsibility for our own feelings but not the feelings of others, while being aware that we can never meet our own needs at the expense of others.

NVC in Action

"Bring Back the Stigma of Illegitimacy!"

A student of Nonviolent Communication volunteering at a food bank was shocked when an elderly co-worker burst out from behind a newspaper, "What we need to do in this country is bring back the stigma of illegitimacy!"

The student's habitual reaction to this kind of statement would have been to say nothing, to judge the other severely but silently, and

eventually to process her own feelings safely away from the scene. This time, she remembered she had the option of listening for the feelings and needs behind the words that had shocked her.

Student: *(first checking out her guess as to what the coworker was observing)* Are you reading something about teenage pregnancies in the paper?

Co-worker: Yes, it's unbelievable how many of them are doing it!

Student: *(now listening for the co-worker's feeling, and what unmet need might be giving rise to this feeling)* Are you feeling alarmed because you'd like kids to have stable families?

Co-worker: Of course! Do you know, my father would have killed me if I had done anything like that!

Student: So you're remembering how it was for the girls in your generation who got pregnant?

Co-worker: Sure thing! We knew what would happen to us if we got pregnant. We were scared about it all the time, not like these girls nowadays.

Student: Are you annoyed that there is no fear of punishment for the girls who get pregnant these days?

Co-worker: Well, at least fear and punishment worked! It says here that there are girls sleeping around with different men just so they can get pregnant! That's right! They have babies and the rest of us in society pay for it!

The student of NVC heard two different feelings in this statement: astonishment that girls would deliberately get pregnant, and annoyance that taxpayers end up paying for children born in this way. She chose which feeling to empathize with.

Student: Are you astonished to realize that people are getting pregnant these days without any consideration for reputation,

consequences, financial stability … all the things you used to consider?

Co-worker: Yeah, and guess who ends up paying for it?

The co-worker, probably feeling heard around her astonishment, moved on to her other feeling: that of annoyance. As often happens when there is a mixture of feelings present, the speaker will return to those that have not received empathic attention. It is not necessary for the listener to reflect back a complex mixture of feelings all at once; the flow of compassion will continue as each feeling comes up again in its turn.

Student: Sounds like you're exasperated because you'd like your tax money to be used for other purposes. Is that so?

Co-worker: Certainly is! Do you know that my son and his wife want a second child and they can't have one—even though they have two jobs—because it costs so much?

Student: I guess you're sad about that? You'd probably love to have a second grandchild …

Co-worker: Yes, and it's not just for me that it would make a difference.

Student: … and for your son to have the family he wants … *(Even though the student guessed only partially correctly, she did not interrupt the flow of empathy, instead allowing the co-worker to continue and realize another concern.)*

Co-worker: Yes, I think it's sad to be a single child too.

Student: Oh, I see; you'd like for Katie to have a little brother?

Co-worker: That would be nice.

At this point, the student sensed a release in her co-worker. A moment of silence elapsed. She felt surprised to discover that, while she still

wanted to express her own views, her urgency and tension had dissipated because she no longer felt "adversarial." She understood the feelings and needs behind her co-worker's statements and no longer felt that the two of them were "worlds apart."

Student: *(expressing herself in NVC, and using all four parts of the process: observation [O], feeling [F], need [N], request [R])* You know, when you first said that we should bring back the stigma of illegitimacy (O), I got really scared (F), because it really matters to me that all of us here share a deep caring for people needing help (N). Some of the people coming here for food are teenage parents (O), and I want to make sure they feel welcome (N). Would you mind telling me how you feel when you see Dashal, or Amy and her boyfriend, walking in? (R)

The dialogue continued with several more exchanges until the woman got the reassurance she needed that her co-worker did indeed offer caring and respectful help to unmarried teen clients. Even more importantly, what the woman gained was a new experience in expressing disagreement in a way that met her needs for honesty and mutual respect.

In the meantime, the co-worker left satisfied that her concerns around teen pregnancy had been fully heard. Both parties felt understood, and their relationship benefited from their having shared their understanding and differences without hostility. In the absence of NVC, their relationship might have begun to deteriorate from this moment, and the work they both wanted to do in common—helping people—might have suffered.

Exercise 3

ACKNOWLEDGING NEEDS

To practice identifying needs, please circle the number in front of each statement where the speaker is acknowledging responsibility for his or her feelings.

1. "You irritate me when you leave company documents on the conference room floor."
2. "I feel angry when you say that, because I am wanting respect and I hear your words as an insult."
3. "I feel frustrated when you come late."
4. "I'm sad that you won't be coming for dinner because I was hoping we could spend the evening together."
5. "I feel disappointed because you said you would do it and you didn't."
6. "I'm discouraged because I would have liked to have progressed further in my work by now."
7. "Little things people say sometimes hurt me."
8. "I feel happy that you received that award."
9. "I feel scared when you raise your voice."
10. "I am grateful that you offered me a ride because I was needing to get home before my children arrive."

Here are my responses for Exercise 3:

1. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the statement implies that the other person's behavior is solely responsible for the speaker's feelings. It doesn't reveal the needs or thoughts that are contributing to the speaker's feelings. To do so, the speaker might have said, "I'm irritated when you leave company documents on the conference room floor, because I want our documents to be safely stored and accessible."
2. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that the speaker is acknowledging responsibility for his or her feelings.

3. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To express the needs or thoughts underlying his or her feelings, the speaker might have said, "I feel frustrated when you come late because I was hoping we'd be able to get some front-row seats."
4. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that the speaker is acknowledging responsibility for his or her feelings.
5. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To express the needs and thoughts underlying his or her feelings, the speaker might have said, "When you said you'd do it and then didn't, I felt disappointed because I want to be able to rely upon your words."
6. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that the speaker is acknowledging responsibility for his or her feelings.
7. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To express the needs and thoughts underlying his or her feelings, the speaker might have said, "Sometimes when people say little things, I feel hurt because I want to be appreciated, not criticized."
8. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To express the needs and thoughts underlying his or her feelings, the speaker might have said, "When you received that award, I felt happy because I was hoping you'd be recognized for all the work you'd put into the project."
9. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To express the needs and thoughts underlying his or her feelings, the speaker might have said, "When you raise your voice, I feel scared because I'm telling myself someone might get hurt here, and I need to know that we're all safe."
10. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that the speaker is acknowledging responsibility for his or her feelings.

6

Requesting That Which Would Enrich Life

We have now covered the first three components of NVC, which address what we are *observing, feeling,* and *needing.* We have learned to do this without criticizing, analyzing, blaming, or diagnosing others, and in a way likely to inspire compassion. The fourth and final component of this process addresses *what we would like to request of others* in order to enrich life for us. When our needs are not being fulfilled, we follow the expression of what we are observing, feeling, and needing with a specific request: we ask for actions that might fulfill our needs. How do we express our requests so that others are more willing to respond compassionately to our needs?

Using Positive Action Language

First of all, we express what we *are* requesting rather than what we *are not* requesting. "How do you do a *don't?*" goes a line of a children's song by my colleague Ruth Bebermeyer: "All I know is I feel *won't* when I'm told to do a *don't.*" These lyrics reveal two problems commonly encountered when requests are worded in the negative. People are often confused as to what is actually being requested, and furthermore, negative requests are likely to provoke resistance.

Use positive language when making requests.

A woman at a workshop, frustrated that her husband was spending so much time at work, described how her request had backfired: "I asked him not to spend so much time at work. Three weeks later, he responded by announcing that he'd signed up for a golf tournament!" She had successfully communicated to him what she did not want—his spending so much time at work—but had failed to request what she *did* want. Encouraged to reword her request, she thought a minute and said, "I wish I had told him that I would like him to spend at least one evening a week at home with the children and me."

During the Vietnam War, I was asked to debate the war issue on television with a man whose position differed from mine. The show was videotaped, so I was able to watch it at home that evening. When I saw myself on the screen communicating in ways I didn't want to be communicating, I felt very upset. "If I'm ever in another discussion," I told myself, "I am determined not to do what I did on that program! I'm not going to be defensive. I'm not going to let them make a fool of me." Notice how I spoke to myself in terms of what I *didn't* want to do rather than in terms of what I *did* want to do.

A chance to redeem myself came the very next week when I was invited to continue the debate on the same program. All the way to the studio, I repeated to myself all the things I didn't want to do. As soon as the program started, the man launched off in exactly the same way he had a week earlier.

For about ten seconds after he'd finished talking, I managed not to communicate in the ways I had been reminding myself. In fact, I said nothing. I just sat there. As soon as I opened my mouth, however, I found words tumbling out in all the ways I had been so determined to avoid! It was a painful lesson about what can happen when I only identify what I *don't* want to do, without clarifying what I *do* want to do.

I was once invited to work with some high school students who suffered a long litany of grievances against their principal. They regarded the principal as racist, and searched for ways to get even with him. A minister who worked closely with the young people became deeply concerned over the prospect of violence. Out of respect for the minister, the students agreed to meet with me.

They began by describing what they saw as discrimination on the part of the principal. After listening to several of their charges, I suggested that they proceed by clarifying what they wanted from the principal.

"What good would that do?" scoffed one student in disgust. "We already went to him to tell him what we wanted. His answer to us was, 'Get out of here! I don't need you people telling me what to do!'"

I asked the students what they had requested of the principal. They recalled saying to him that they didn't want him telling them how to wear their hair. I suggested that they might have received a more cooperative response if they had expressed what they *did,* rather than what they *did not,* want. They had then informed the principal that they wanted to be treated with fairness, at which he had become defensive, vociferously denying ever having been unfair. I ventured to guess that the principal would have responded more favorably if they had asked for specific actions rather than vague behavior like "fair treatment."

Working together, we found ways to express their requests in positive action language. At the end of the meeting, the students had clarified thirty-eight actions they wanted the principal to take, including "We'd like you to agree to black student representation on decisions made about dress code," and "We'd like you to refer to us as 'black students' and not 'you people.'" The following day, the students presented their requests to the principal using the positive action language we had practiced; that evening I received an elated phone call from them: their principal had agreed to all thirty-eight requests!

In addition to using positive language, we also want to word our requests in the form of concrete actions that others can undertake and to avoid vague, abstract, or ambiguous phrasing. A cartoon depicts a man who has fallen into a lake. As he struggles to swim, he shouts to his dog on shore, "Lassie, get help!" In the next frame, the dog is lying on a psychiatrist's couch. We all know how opinions vary as to what constitutes "help": some members of my family, when asked to help with the dishes, think "help" means supervision.

A couple in distress attending a workshop provides an additional illustration of how nonspecific language can hamper understanding and communication. "I want you to let me be me," the woman declared to her husband. "I do!" he retorted. "No, you don't!" she insisted. Asked to express herself in positive action language, the woman replied, "I want you to give me the freedom to grow and be myself." Such a statement, however, is just as vague and likely to provoke a defensive response. She struggled to formulate her request clearly, and then admitted, "It's kind of awkward, but if I were to be precise, I guess what I want is for you to smile and say that anything I do is okay." Often, the use of vague and abstract language can mask oppressive interpersonal games.

Making requests in clear, positive, concrete action language reveals what we really want.

A similar lack of clarity occurred between a father and his fifteen-year-old son when they came in for counseling. "All I want is for you to start showing a little responsibility," claimed the father. "Is that asking too much?" I suggested that he specify what it would take for his son to demonstrate the responsibility he was seeking. After a discussion on how to clarify his request, the father responded sheepishly, "Well, it doesn't sound so good, but when I say that I want responsibility, what I really mean is that I want him to do what I ask, without question—to jump when I say jump, and to smile while doing it." He then agreed with me that if his son were to actually behave this way, it would demonstrate obedience rather than responsibility.

Like this father, we often use vague and abstract language to indicate how we want other people to feel or be without naming a concrete action

they could take to reach that state. For example, an employer makes a genuine effort to invite feedback, telling the employees, "I want you to feel free to express yourself around me." The statement communicates the employer's desire for the employees to "feel free," but not what they could do in order to feel this way. Instead, the employer could use positive action language to make a request: "I'd like you to *tell* me what I might *do* to make it easier for you to feel free to express yourselves around me."

Vague language contributes to internal confusion.

Depression is the reward we get for being "good."

As a final illustration of how the use of vague language contributes to internal confusion, I would like to present the conversation that I would invariably have during my practice as a clinical psychologist with the many clients who came to me with complaints of depression. After I empathized with the depth of feeling that a client had just expressed, our exchanges would typically proceed in the following manner:

MBR: What are you wanting that you are not receiving?

Client: I don't know what I want.

MBR: I guessed that you would say that.

Client: Why?

MBR: My theory is that we get depressed because we're not getting what we want, and we're not getting what we want because we have never been taught to get what we want. Instead, we've been taught to be good little boys and girls and good mothers and fathers. If we're going to be one of those good things, better get used to being depressed. Depression is the reward we get for being "good." But, if you want to feel better, I'd like you to clarify what you would like people to do to make life more wonderful for you.

Client: I just want someone to love me. That's hardly unreasonable, is it?

MBR: It's a good start. Now I'd like you to clarify what you would like

people to do that would fulfill your need to be loved. For example, what could I do right now?

Client: Oh, you know …

MBR: I'm not sure I do. I'd like you to tell me what you would like me, or others, to do to give you the love you're looking for.

Client: That's hard.

MBR: Yes, it can be difficult to make clear requests. But think how hard it will be for others to respond to our request if we're not even clear what it is!

Client: I'm starting to get clear what I want from others to fulfill my need for love, but it's embarrassing.

MBR: Yes, very often it is embarrassing. So what would you like for me or others to do?

Client: If I really reflect upon what I'm requesting when I ask to be loved, I suppose I want you to guess what I want before I'm even aware of it. And then I want you to always do it.

MBR: I'm grateful for your clarity. I hope you can see how you are not likely to find someone who can fulfill your need for love if that's what it takes.

Very often, my clients were able to see how the lack of awareness of what they wanted from others had contributed significantly to their frustrations and depression.

Making Requests Consciously

Sometimes we may be able to communicate a clear request without putting it in words. Suppose you're in the kitchen and your sister, who is watching television in the living room, calls out, "I'm thirsty." In this case, it may be obvious that she is requesting you to bring her a glass of water from the kitchen.

However, in other instances, we may express our discomfort and incorrectly assume that the listener has understood the underlying request. For example, a woman might say to her husband, "I'm annoyed you forgot the butter and onions I asked you to pick up for dinner." While it may be obvious to her that she is asking him to go back to the store, the husband may think that her words were uttered solely to make him feel guilty.

When we simply express our feelings, it may not be clear to the listener what we want them to do.

Even more often, we are simply not conscious of what we are requesting when we speak. We talk *to* others or *at* them without knowing how to engage in a dialogue *with* them. We toss out words, using the presence of others as a wastebasket. In such situations, the listener, unable to discern a clear request in the speaker's words, may experience the kind of distress illustrated in the following anecdote.

We are often not conscious of what we are requesting.

I was seated directly across the aisle from a couple on a mini-train that carries passengers to their respective terminals at the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. For passengers in a hurry to catch a plane, the snail's pace of the train may well be irritating. The man turned to his wife and said with intensity, "I have never seen a train go so slow in all my life." She said nothing, appearing tense and uneasy as to what response he might be expecting from her. He then did what many of us do when we're not getting

the response we want: he repeated himself. In a markedly stronger voice, he exclaimed, "I have never seen a train go so slow in all my life!"

The wife, at a loss for response, looked even more distressed. In desperation, she turned to him and said, "They're electronically timed." I didn't think this piece of information would satisfy him, and indeed it did not, for he repeated himself a third time—even more loudly, *"I HAVE NEVER SEEN A TRAIN GO SO SLOW IN ALL MY LIFE!"* The wife's patience was clearly exhausted as she snapped back angrily, "Well, what do you want me to do about it? Get out and push?" Now there were two people in pain!

What response was the man wanting? I believe he wanted to hear that his pain was understood. If his wife had known this, she might have responded, "It sounds like you're scared we might miss our plane, and disgusted because you'd like a faster train running between these terminals."

Requests may sound like demands when unaccompanied by the speaker's feelings and needs.

In the above exchange, the wife heard the husband's frustration but was clueless as to what he was asking for. Equally problematic is the reverse situation—when people state their requests without first communicating the feelings and needs behind them. This is especially true when the request takes the form of a question. "Why don't you go and get a haircut?" can easily be heard by youngsters as a demand or an attack unless parents remember to first reveal their own feelings and needs: "We're worried that your hair is getting so long it might keep you from seeing things, especially when you're on your bike. How about a haircut?"

It is more common, however, for people to talk without being conscious of what they are asking for. "I'm not requesting anything," they might remark. "I just felt like saying what I said." My belief is that, whenever we say something to another person, we are requesting something in return. It may simply be an empathic connection—a verbal or nonverbal acknowledgment, as with the man on the train, that our words have been understood. Or we may be requesting honesty: we wish to know the listener's honest reaction to our words. Or we may be requesting an action that we hope would fulfill our

needs. The clearer we are on what we want back from the other person, the more likely it is that our needs will be met.

The clearer we are about what we want, the more likely it is that we'll get it.

Asking for a Reflection

As we know, the message we send is not always the message that's received. We generally rely on verbal cues to determine whether our message has been understood to our satisfaction. If, however, we're uncertain that it has been received as intended, we need to be able to clearly request a response that tells us how the message was heard so as to be able to correct any misunderstanding. On some occasions, a simple question like, "Is that clear?" will suffice. At other times, we need more than "Yes, I understood you," to feel confident that we've been truly understood. At such times, we might ask others to reflect back in their own words what they heard us say. We then have the opportunity to restate parts of our message to address any discrepancy or omission we might have noticed in their reflection.

To make sure the message we sent is the message that's received, ask the listener to reflect it back.

For example, a teacher approaches a student and says, "Peter, I got concerned when I checked my record book yesterday. I want to make sure you're aware of the homework I'm missing from you. Will you drop by my office after school?" Peter mumbles, "Okay, I know," and then turns away, leaving the teacher uneasy as to whether her message had been accurately received. She asks for a reflection—"Could you tell me what you just heard me say?"—to which Peter replies, "You said I gotta miss soccer to stay after school because you didn't like my homework." Confirmed in her suspicion that Peter had not heard her intended message, the teacher tries to restate it, but first she is careful of her next remark.

An assertion like "You didn't hear me," "That's not what I said," or "You're misunderstanding me," may easily lead Peter to think that he is being chastised. Since the teacher perceives Peter as having sincerely responded to her request for a reflection, she might say, "I'm grateful to you for telling me what you heard. I can see that I didn't make myself as clear as I'd have liked, so let me try again."

Express appreciation when your listener tries to meet your request for a reflection.

When we first begin asking others to reflect back what they hear us say, it may feel awkward and strange because such requests are rarely made. When I emphasize the importance of our ability to ask for reflections, people often express reservations. They are worried about reactions like, "What do you think I am—deaf?" or, "Quit playing your psychological games." To prevent such responses, we can explain to people ahead of time why we may sometimes ask them to reflect back our words. We make clear that we're not testing their listening skills, but checking out whether we've expressed ourselves clearly. However, should the listener retort, "I heard what you said; I'm not stupid!" we have the option to focus on the listener's feelings and needs and ask—either aloud or silently—"Are you saying you're feeling annoyed because you want respect for your ability to understand things?"

Empathize with the listener who doesn't want to reflect back.

Requesting Honesty

After we've openly expressed ourselves and received the understanding we want, we're often eager to know the other person's reaction to what we've said. Usually the honesty we would like to receive takes one of three directions:

- Sometimes we'd like to know the feelings that are stimulated by what we said, and the reasons for those feelings. We might request this by asking, "I would like you to tell me how you feel about what I just said, and your reasons for feeling as you do."

After we express ourselves vulnerably, we often want to know (1) what the listener is feeling;

- Sometimes we'd like to know something about our listener's thoughts in response to what they just heard us say. At these times, it's important to specify which thoughts we'd like them to share. For example, we might say, "I'd like you to tell me if you predict that my proposal would be successful, and if not, what you believe would prevent its success," rather than simply saying, "I'd like you to tell me what you think about what I've said." When we don't specify which thoughts we would like to receive, the other person may respond at great length with thoughts that aren't the ones we are seeking.

(2) what the listener is thinking; or

- Sometimes we'd like to know whether the person is willing to take certain actions that we've recommended. Such a request may sound like this: "I'd like you to tell me if you would be willing to postpone our meeting for one week."

(3) whether the listener would be willing to take a particular action.

The use of NVC requires that we be conscious of the specific form of honesty we would like to receive, and to make that request for honesty in concrete language.

Making Requests of a Group

It is especially important when we are addressing a group to be clear about the kind of understanding or honesty we want back after we've expressed ourselves. When we are not clear about the response we'd like, we may initiate unproductive conversations that end up satisfying no one's needs.

I've been invited from time to time to work with groups of citizens concerned about racism in their communities. One issue that frequently arises among these groups is that their meetings are tedious and fruitless. This lack of productivity is very costly for group members, who often expend limited resources to arrange for transportation and child care in order to attend meetings. Frustrated by prolonged discussions that yield little direction, many members quit the groups, declaring meetings a waste of time. Furthermore, the institutional changes they are striving to make are not usually ones that occur quickly or easily. For all these reasons, when such groups do meet, it's important that they make good use of their time together.

I knew members of one such group that had been organized to effect change in the local school system. It was their belief that various elements in the school system discriminated against students on the basis of race. Because their meetings were unproductive and the group was losing members, they invited me to observe their discussions. I suggested that they conduct their meeting as usual, and that I would let them know if I saw any ways NVC might help.

One man began the meeting by calling the group's attention to a recent newspaper article in which a minority mother had raised complaints and concerns regarding the principal's treatment of her daughter. A woman responded by sharing a situation that had occurred to her when she was a student at the same school. One by one, each member then related a similar personal experience. After twenty minutes I asked the group if their needs were being met by the current discussion. Not one person said yes. "This is what happens all the time in these meetings!" huffed one man, "I have better things to do with my time than sit around listening to the same old bullshit."

I then addressed the man who had initiated the discussion: "Can you tell me, when you brought up the newspaper article, what response you were

wanting from the group?"

"I thought it was interesting," he replied. I explained that I was asking what response he wanted from the group, rather than what he thought about the article. He pondered awhile and then conceded, "I'm not sure what I wanted."

And that's why, I believe, twenty minutes of the group's valuable time had been squandered on fruitless discourse. When we address a group without being clear what we are wanting back, unproductive discussions will often follow. However, if even one member of a group is conscious of the importance of clearly requesting the response that is desired, he or she can extend this consciousness to the group. For example, when this particular speaker didn't define what response he wanted, a member of the group might have said, "I'm confused about how you'd like us to respond to your story. Would you be willing to say what response you'd like from us?" Such interventions can prevent the waste of precious group time.

In a group, much time is wasted when speakers aren't certain what response they're wanting.

Conversations often drag on and on, fulfilling no one's needs, because it is unclear whether the initiator of the conversation has gotten what she or he wanted. In India, when people have received the response they want in conversations they have initiated, they say "bas" (pronounced "bus"). This means, "You need not say more. I feel satisfied and am now ready to move on to something else." Though we lack such a word in our own language, we can benefit from developing and promoting "bas-consciousness" in all our interactions.

Requests versus Demands

Our requests are received as demands when others believe they will be blamed or punished if they do not comply. When people hear a demand, they see only two options: submission or rebellion. Either way, the person requesting is perceived as coercive, and the listener's capacity to respond compassionately to the request is diminished.

> **When the other person hears a demand from us, they see two options: to submit or to rebel.**

The more we have in the past blamed, punished, or "laid guilt trips" on others when they haven't responded to our requests, the higher the likelihood that our requests will now be heard as demands. We also pay for others' use of such tactics. To the degree that people in our lives have been blamed, punished, or urged to feel guilty for not doing what others have requested, the more likely they are to carry this baggage to every subsequent relationship and hear a demand in any request.

> **To tell if it's a demand or a request, observe what the speaker does if the request is not complied with.**

Let's look at two variations of a situation. Jack says to his friend Jane, "I'm lonely and would like you to spend the evening with me." Is that a request or a demand? The answer is that we don't know until we observe how Jack treats Jane if she doesn't comply. Suppose she replies, "Jack, I'm really tired. If you'd like some company, how about finding someone else to be with you this evening?" If Jack then remarks, "How typical of you to be so selfish!" his request was in fact a demand. Instead of empathizing with her need to rest, he has blamed her.

> **It's a demand if the speaker then criticizes or judges.**

Consider a second scenario:

Jack: I'm lonely and would like you to spend the evening with me.

Jane: Jack, I'm really tired. If you'd like some company, how about finding someone else to be with you tonight?

Jack: *(turns away wordlessly)*

Jane: *(sensing he is upset)* Is something bothering you?

Jack: No.

Jane: Come on, Jack, I can sense something's going on. What's the matter?

Jack: You know how lonely I'm feeling. If you really loved me, you'd spend the evening with me.

Again, instead of empathizing, Jack now interprets Jane's response to mean that she doesn't love him and that she has rejected him. The more we interpret noncompliance as rejection, the more likely our requests will be heard as demands. This leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy, for the more people hear demands, the less they enjoy being around us.

It's a demand if the speaker then lays a guilt trip.

On the other hand, we would know that Jack's request had been a genuine request, not a demand, if his response to Jane had expressed a respectful recognition of her feelings and needs. For example: "So, Jane, you're feeling worn out and needing some rest this evening?"

We can help others trust that we are requesting, not demanding, by indicating that we would only want them to comply if they can do so willingly. Thus we might ask, "Would you be willing to set the table?" rather than "I would like you to set the table." However, the most powerful way to communicate that we are making a genuine request is to empathize with people when they don't agree to the request.

It's a request if the speaker then shows empathy toward the other person's needs.

We demonstrate that we are making a request rather than a demand by how we respond when others don't comply. If we are prepared to show an empathic understanding of what prevents someone from doing as we asked, then by my definition, we have made a request, not a demand. Choosing to request rather than demand does not mean we give up when someone says no to our request. It does mean that we don't engage in persuasion until we have empathized with what's preventing the other person from saying yes.

Defining Our Objective When Making Requests

Expressing genuine requests also requires an awareness of our objective. If our objective is only to change people and their behavior or to get our way, then NVC is not an appropriate tool. The process is designed for those of us who would like others to change and respond, but only if they choose to do so willingly and compassionately. The objective of NVC is to establish a relationship based on honesty and empathy. When others trust that our primary commitment is to the quality of the relationship, and that we expect this process to fulfill everyone's needs, then they can trust that our requests are true requests and not camouflaged demands.

Our objective is a relationship based on honesty and empathy.

A consciousness of this objective is difficult to maintain, especially for parents, teachers, managers, and others whose work centers around influencing people and obtaining behavioral results. A mother who once returned to a workshop after a lunch break announced, "Marshall, I went home and tried it. It didn't work." I asked her to describe what she'd done.

"I went home and expressed my feelings and needs, just as we'd practiced. I made no criticism, no judgments of my son. I simply said, 'Look, when I see that you haven't done the work you said you were going to do, I feel very disappointed. I wanted to be able to come home and find the house in order and your chores completed.' Then I made a request: I told him I wanted him to clean it up immediately."

"It sounds like you clearly expressed all the components," I commented. "What happened?"

"He didn't do it."

"Then what happened?" I asked.

"I told him he couldn't go through life being lazy and irresponsible."

I could see that this woman was not yet able to distinguish between expressing requests and making demands. She was still defining the process as successful only if she got compliance for her "requests." During the initial

phases of learning this process, we may find ourselves applying the components of NVC mechanically without awareness of the underlying purpose.

Sometimes, however, even when we're conscious of our intent and express our request with care, people may still hear a demand. This is particularly true when we occupy positions of authority and are speaking with those who have had past experiences with coercive authority figures.

Once, the administrator of a high school invited me to demonstrate to teachers how NVC might help them communicate with students who weren't cooperating as the teachers would have liked.

I was asked to meet with forty students who had been deemed "socially and emotionally maladjusted." I was struck by the way such labels serve as self-fulfilling prophecies. If you were a student who had been thus labeled, wouldn't it just give you permission to have some fun at school by resisting whatever was asked of you? When we give people labels, we tend to act in a way that contributes to the very behavior that concerns us, which we then view as further confirmation of our diagnosis. Since these students knew they had been classified as "socially and emotionally maladjusted," I wasn't surprised that when I walked in, most of them were hanging out the window hollering obscenities at their friends in the courtyard below.

I began by making a request: "I'd like you all to come over and sit down so I can tell you who I am and what I'd like us to do today." About half the students came over. Uncertain that they had all heard me, I repeated my request. With that, the remainder of the students sat down, with the exception of two young men who remained draped over the windowsill. Unfortunately for me, these two were the biggest students in the class.

"Excuse me," I addressed them, "would one of you two gentlemen tell me what you heard me say?" One of them turned toward me and snorted, "Yeah, you said we had to go over there and sit down." I thought to myself, "Uh, oh, he's heard my request as a demand."

Out loud I said, "Sir"—I've learned always to say "sir" to people with biceps like his, especially when one of them sports a tattoo—"would you be willing to tell me how I could have let you know what I was wanting so that it wouldn't sound like I was bossing you around?"

"Huh?" Having been conditioned to expect demands from authorities, he was not used to my different approach. "How can I let you know what I'm

wanting from you so it doesn't sound like I don't care about what you'd like?" I repeated. He hesitated for a moment and shrugged, "I don't know."

"What's going on between you and me right now is a good example of what I was wanting us to talk about today. I believe people can enjoy each other a lot better if they can say what they would like without bossing others around. When I tell you what I'd like, I'm not saying that you have to do it or I'll try to make your life miserable. I don't know how to say that in a way that you can trust." To my relief, this seemed to make sense to the young man who, together with his friend, sauntered over to join the group. In certain situations, such as this one, it may take awhile for our requests to be clearly seen for what they are.

When making a request, it is also helpful to scan our minds for the sort of thoughts that automatically transform requests into demands:

- He *should* be cleaning up after himself.
- She's *supposed* to do what I ask.
- I *deserve* to get a raise.
- I'm *justified* in having them stay later.
- I have a *right* to more time off.

When we frame our needs with these thoughts, we are bound to judge others when they don't do as we request. I had these self-righteous thoughts in my mind once when my younger son was not taking out the garbage. When we were dividing the household chores, he had agreed to this task, but every day we would have another struggle about getting the garbage out. Every day I would remind him, "This is your job," and "We all have jobs"—with the sole objective of getting him to take out the garbage.

Finally, one night I listened more closely to what he'd been telling me all along about why the garbage wasn't going out. I wrote the following song after that evening's discussion. After my son felt my empathy for his position, he began taking out the garbage without any further reminder from me.

If I clearly understand
you intend no demand,
I'll usually respond when you call.
But if you come across
like a high and mighty boss,

you'll feel like you ran into a wall.
And when you remind me
so piously
about all those things you've done for me,
you'd better get ready:
Here comes another bout!
Then you can shout,
you can spit,
moan, groan, and throw a fit;
I still won't take the garbage out.
Now even if you should change your style,
It's going to take me a little while
before I can forgive and forget.
Because it seems to me that you
didn't see me as human too
until all your standards were met.

—"Song from Brett" by Marshall B. Rosenberg

Summary

The fourth component of NVC addresses the question of *what we would like to request of each other to enrich each of our lives.* We try to avoid vague, abstract, or ambiguous phrasing, and remember to use positive action language by stating what we *are* requesting rather than what we are *not.*

Each time we speak, the clearer we are about what we want back, the more likely we are to get it. Since the message we send is not always the message that's received, we need to learn how to find out if our message has been accurately heard. Especially when we are expressing ourselves in a group, we need to be clear about the nature of the response we are wanting. Otherwise we may be initiating unproductive conversations that waste considerable group time.

Requests are received as demands when listeners believe that they will be blamed or punished if they do not comply. We can help others trust that we are requesting, not demanding, by indicating our desire for them to comply only if they can do so willingly. The objective of NVC is not to change people and their behavior in order to get our way; it is to establish relationships based on honesty and empathy that will eventually fulfill everyone's needs.

NVC in Action

Sharing Fears About a Best Friend's Smoking

Al and Burt have been best friends for over thirty years. Al, a nonsmoker, has done everything he can over the years to persuade Burt to give up his two-pack-a-day habit. In the past, when Al had tried to get him to quit, Burt had often accused Al of judging him.

Aware during the past year of the increasing severity of his friend's hacking cough, Al finds himself bursting out one day with all the energy and life that had been buried in his unexpressed anger and fear.

Al: Burt, I know we've talked about this a dozen times, but listen.

I'm scared your damned cigarettes are going to kill you! You're my best friend, and I want you around for as long as I can have you. Please don't think I'm judging you. I'm not—I'm just really worried.

Burt: No, I hear your concern. We've been friends for a long time …

Al: *(making a request)* Would you be willing to quit?

Burt: I wish I could.

Al: *(listening for the feelings and needs preventing Burt from agreeing to the request)* Are you scared to try because you don't want to fail?

Burt: Yeah … you know how many times I've tried before … I know people think less of me for not being able to quit.

Al: *(guessing at what Burt might want to request)* I don't think less of you. And if you tried and failed again, I still wouldn't. I just wish you'd try.

Burt: Thanks. But you're not the only one…. It's everyone: you can see it in their eyes—they think you're a failure.

Al: *(empathizing with Burt's feeling)* Is it kind of overwhelming to worry about what others might think, when just quitting is hard enough?

Burt: I really hate the idea that I might be addicted, that I have something that I just can't control …

Al: *(Al's eyes connect with Burt's; he nods his head. Al's interest and attention to Burt's deep feelings and needs are revealed through his eyes and the silence that follows.)*

Burt: I mean, I don't even like smoking any more. It's like you're a pariah if you do it in public. It's embarrassing.

Al: *(continuing to empathize)* It sounds like you'd really like to quit, but are scared you might fail—and how that would be for your self-image and confidence.

Burt: Yeah, I guess that's it…. You know, I don't think I've ever talked about it before. Usually when people tell me to quit, I just tell

them to get lost. I'd like to quit, but I don't want all that pressure from people.

Al: I wouldn't want to pressure you. I don't know if I could reassure you about your fears around not succeeding, but I sure would like to support you in any way I can. That is … if you want me to….

Burt: Yes, I do. I'm really touched by your concern and willingness. But … suppose I'm not ready to try yet, is that okay with you too?

Al: Of course, Burt, I'll still like you as much. It's just that I want to like you for longer!

Because Al's request was a genuine request, not a demand, he maintained awareness of his commitment to the quality of the relationship, regardless of Burt's response. He expressed this awareness and his respect for Burt's need for autonomy through his words, "I'll still like you," while simultaneously expressing his own need "to like you for longer."

Burt: Well, then, maybe I will try again … but don't tell anyone else, okay?

Al: Sure, you decide when you're ready; I won't be mentioning it to anybody.

Exercise 4

EXPRESSING REQUESTS

To see whether we're in agreement about the clear expression of requests, circle the number in front of each of the following statements in which the speaker is clearly requesting that a specific action be taken.

1. "I want you to understand me."
2. "I'd like you to tell me one thing that I did that you appreciate."
3. "I'd like you to feel more confidence in yourself."
4. "I want you to stop drinking."
5. "I'd like you to let me be me."
6. "I'd like you to be honest with me about yesterday's meeting."
7. "I would like you to drive at or below the speed limit."
8. "I'd like to get to know you better."
9. "I would like you to show respect for my privacy."
10. "I'd like you to prepare supper more often."

Here are my responses for Exercise 4:

1. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the word *understand* does not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I want you to tell me what you heard me say."
2. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that the speaker is clearly requesting a specific action.
3. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *feel more confidence* do not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I'd like you to take a course in assertiveness training, which I believe would increase your self-confidence."

4. 4. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *stop drinking* do not express what the speaker wants, but rather what he or she doesn't want. A request for a specific action might be: "I want you to tell me what needs of yours are met by drinking, and to discuss with me other ways of meeting those needs."
5. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *let me be me* do not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I want you to tell me you won't leave our relationship—even if I do some things that you don't like."
6. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *be honest with me* do not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I want you to tell me how you feel about what I did and what you'd like me to do differently."
7. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that the speaker is clearly requesting a specific action.
8. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *get to know you better* do not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I'd like you to tell me if you would be willing to meet for lunch once a week."
9. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *show respect for my privacy* do not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I'd like you to agree to knock before you enter my office."
10. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the words *more often* do not clearly express a request for a specific action. A request for a specific action might be: "I'd like you to prepare supper every Monday night."