

Imagine.

Imagine compassionate communication with your partner, child, parent, employee, co-worker or boss. Imagine connecting heart to heart, exchanging willingly out of service to self and others -- not out of duty or obligation, guilt or shame, not out of hope for a reward, or fear of punishment, but by connecting through our mutually caring natures. These are the goals of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) as promoted by its founder, clinical psychologist Marshall Rosenberg. Studying the factors that affect our ability to maintain compassion, Dr. Rosenberg was struck by the crucial role language plays. He calls us to recognize that even though we may not consider our words to be violent, they often create pain for ourselves or others.

My house. Chore war. "Asa, you need to unload the dishwasher," I tell my teen. "I'll do it later," he replies. "You need to do it now." "Why?" "Because it's your job." "OK, but I don't need to do it now." "I don't want to have to remind you to do it later," I point out, "so you need to do it now." "I'd really like to put those dishes away now, Dad, but my iPod's a lot more fun." "Perhaps you'd like to be separated from your dear iPod for a few days?" "OK Dad, I'll put the dishes away now."

There must be a better way, I confide to Gregg Kendrick, a certified trainer for the Center for NVC and the Charlottesville Center for Compassionate Communication. Gregg will be the next presenter for SHARE, on Thursday, August 16th from 7:30-9, at the Unity Church. Role play, NVC exercises and dialogues will dominate this 90-minute interactive presentation.

Armed (as in "arms are for hugging") with some coaching from Gregg, I try a different approach. "Hey Asa, I really like to have this place be clean and look good, and I could use some support. Could you help me out by putting away the dishes?" "Sure Dad." Wow. Admittedly, this technique hasn't worked every time, but it has permeated my approach and improved the home vibes, even though I've sometimes gotten responses such as "Well, if you put it that way, I think I'll go play next door." What has changed is that my son is offering more help without being asked, just because he's discovering that it feels good to make someone else's life more wonderful.

It was Mahatma Gandhi who launched a worldwide nonviolence movement that, later in the same century, found its roots taking hold in the social activism of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela, both of whom chose to advocate healing, forgiveness and

restorative justice over retribution.

Simple, yet powerful, NVC can be put to use with life's tiny but tiring battles (like my mediation of household chores), and it is also showing its merits in the global conflicts of our time -- teams under Rosenberg's direction are teaching the philosophies and techniques of NVC conflict resolution in Palestine, Israel, Bosnia, Croatia, Rwanda and Ireland.

Dr. Rosenberg tells a story about presenting NVC to a refugee camp in Palestine. Attitudes towards Americans were not favorable and a wave of commotion went through the crowd when his nationality was discovered. A man in the audience leapt to his feet, screaming, "Murderer! Child-killer! Assassin!" Rosenberg faced the man and calmly addressed him: "Are you angry because you'd like my government to use its resources differently?" The Palestinian replied "Damn right I'm angry! We don't need your tear gas. We need sewers, housing and our own country!" Dr. Rosenberg said, "So you're furious and would appreciate some support in improving your living conditions and gaining political independence?" The gentleman continued to vent and Dr. Rosenberg continued to voice empathy for nearly 20 minutes. He listened and, even more constructively, confirmed his understanding of the man's feelings by restating the essence of the communication. He demonstrated his comprehension of the feeling and need behind each statement, neither agreeing or disagreeing. He received the words as gifts from a fellow human being who was willing to vulnerably share his soul. After Dr. Rosenberg's NVC presentation, the man invited him for Ramadan dinner.

Imagine. Imagine all the people, living life in peace.