

On Dealing Nonviolently with Hate

How Nonviolent Communication can help to have a real conversation with someone whose behavior does not suit us.

Simran K. Wester, in "Constructive Communication in Democracy" by Gegen Vergessen – Für Demokratie e.V. (to be published in Dec. 2020 in Berlin)

When Renate Künast, member of the Bundestag for the Green Party, set out in October 2016 to visit the people who had sent her insulting comments and so-called hate mail (1), I was very impressed. It takes courage to turn to the people who tried to throw you off track with intimidation. Mrs. Künast was accompanied by a journalist who followed the encounters. She wanted to visit the people the way they had entered their lives, uninvited and unannounced. She always came straight to the point and said at the front door, after she had introduced herself: 'I would like to know why you wrote this to me' and held a copy of her post under the noses of those addressed. They reacted confused, surprised or appeased, one was almost enthusiastic because he received so much attention from a well-known politician. Even though some of them actually tried to answer her question, I have the impression that in no case did a real understanding come about. What Mrs. Künast heard as justification were mostly set pieces from the right conspiracy corner. Arguments were held against each other without actually listening. In the end, every conversation was about who was right, and even that was not clarified.

I find this attempt courageous in any case because Mrs. Künast dared to venture out of the protective zone of the Bundestag and her parliamentary group and approached the people individually, directly, on their own territory. She has thus shown herself to be an accessible, vulnerable person who cares about other people.

I would have wished her to have considered a few insights of non-violent communication - maybe the talks would have been more successful in terms of a consensual understanding. (I don't want to teach Ms. Künast a better lesson here, but rather use the example of these encounters to explain a few starting points of non-violent communication).

Eye level

One of the most important insights is the eye level. Descending from the political Olympus and addressing people directly was a first important step in this direction. But eye level is a complex matter. It requires that the counterpart be seen as equal, equal in status and worthy of the same. Renate Künast, however, "caught" those she visited unprepared and gained a head start through the surprise effect. Although this may be an understandable course of action from her point of view, it is a bit reminiscent of revenge and automatically forced those who were taken by surprise into a defensive position: their dignity was threatened because they ran the risk of embarrassing themselves. In addition, Ms. Künast did not appear alone, but had a journalist at her side: whatever the addressed people would say or do could be presented to the public within a short time. Her willingness and ability to engage in a real conversation were certainly not very great due to these circumstances. It seems that they regarded Ms. Künast's appearance as a challenge that they were not up to at the time.

So in order to really make this eye level possible, another initiation of the encounter would have been useful. To do this, you first need to prepare yourself well: what is the goal of the encounter?

What should come out in the end? Is the goal of the conversation to find an agreement, a solution with which both agree, or at least an attitude of mutual respect? Or is the goal, on the other hand, to convince the other person, to refute it or otherwise make it clear to him or her that it is wrong and that we ourselves are right?

Apparently Mrs. Künast was out to make it clear to the senders of the hate comments that they had behaved morally wrong. She confronted them with her reprehensible words and asked them to justify themselves. As it turned out, a consensual solution or agreement was not reached. In my impression, the fronts were not softened.

First connection, then solution

Another important insight of non-violent communication is the principle of "First connect, then solve". Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of Nonviolent Communication, says: "Until a person gets the empathy he needs, especially when he is afraid or has been hurt, he is not ready to empathize with his opponent. (2)

The principle is based on the realization that it is very helpful to really understand each other before we start looking for a common solution or agreement. Without this connection it is rather unlikely that our counterpart is even interested in a common solution - if we do not understand this person or he does not understand us, why should he try to reach an agreement?

However, before we begin to understand the needs behind the other person's behavior, it makes sense that we first recognize and acknowledge our own needs that have been addressed by the particular trigger. It can be helpful to tap into every single judgement we have about him or her, to tap into our underlying unfulfilled needs and allow for the feelings associated with them. In Mrs. Künast's example, such a judgement could have been: 'Such an idiot!' Perhaps underneath this was the need for careful, respectful interaction as well as for mental and physical integrity. The disappointment that these were not given in the commentary that had been sent to her could now be given space.

By allowing the feelings and acknowledging the needs, something relaxes within us. Our concern has been heard at least by ourselves before, perhaps even by a friend. This is important so that we can articulate it later without reproach or blame. Only when we let go of our judgments about the other person will we be able to open up to him or her and perceive him or her as an equal human being who has feelings just like ourselves and is committed to his or her needs - albeit in a way that is painful for us and does not seem understandable at first.

Needs

The knowledge of our needs is central to the attitude of non-violent communication. They were formulated primarily by Carl Rogers in the 1950s to 1980s (3) and represent the basic equipment with which we humans navigate through life. To fulfill them or to get them fulfilled makes us happy, not to fulfill them or to get them fulfilled has the opposite effect. Marshall Rosenberg, as a student and later colleague of Carl Rogers, continued his humanistic psychology by developing a four-step model for successful, authentic communication in which needs are seen as the pivotal point. The ability to empathize as described by Carl Rogers plays an important role in being able to resonate with others and thus understand them 'with the heart'. "For me, this precious gift is about presence, and that is truly the essence of nonviolent communication" (4)

According to Rosenberg, needs are universal, "all people have the same needs" (5), it is what makes us human. They are general, that is, independent of time and space, and also independent of particular persons. Rosenberg sees all needs in principle as equally important for our happiness and, unlike Abraham Maslow (6) or others, does not arrange them hierarchically, "but refers to the respective moment. In every moment human needs are fulfilled or unfulfilled." (7) In concrete situations, individual needs may be more important than others. Examples of needs that can play a role in a conflict Recognition, appreciation, understanding, consideration, self-determination, belonging. In the case of Ms. Künast, it was probably mainly about respect and attentiveness, also about understanding and appreciation.

The ways in which we seek to fulfill our needs are called strategies in Nonviolent Communication. Distinguishing them from our needs is helpful because others can connect with us more easily when we refer to our needs - because they are familiar to them themselves. Moreover, this distinction allows us more inner freedom of choice in how we react. When we relate to our needs rather than sticking to a particular strategy, we are more flexible in unexpected turns. The fact that Ms. Künast had decided to track down the senders of the hate mail and pay them a surprise visit was one possible strategy for meeting her needs - in principle she could have found other ways.

Feelings

We recognize the state of our needs by our feelings: unpleasant feelings indicate unfulfilled needs, pleasant feelings indicate fulfilled needs. The comments may have initially caused a shock to Mrs. Künast, then she was probably hurt, disappointed and insecure, perhaps sad, and finally probably angry or even enraged.

Phrases such as 'I did not feel valued' or 'I had the feeling of being insulted', which have become commonplace in modern language, do not in fact denote feelings, but are reproaches against the person whose behaviour was difficult for us. Such formulations are called pseudo-feelings in non-violent communication, which make it difficult for the accused person to resonate with our real feelings and needs. If such a formulation is on the tip of our tongue, we can ask ourselves: If I think (for example) I am insulted, how do I feel? (Probably sad or hurt.)

Anger

It is therefore necessary to perceive and acknowledge the real, triggered feelings, they are an important indication of what is at stake for us. Especially anger is a rich feeling: according to M. Rosenberg it is a mixture of judgments we have about others in our minds and the energy of feelings and needs to which we have no access at that moment. (8) This is also where the insight comes from that our anger is precious - but only for ourselves. It can tell us a lot about ourselves: about the underlying feelings and needs that we spontaneously try to protect with its help (or from which we try to protect ourselves, especially from our helplessness and powerlessness). Unfortunately, most of the time we have not learned to express our anger as a statement about ourselves, but use it to attack the other person, so that our chances of reaching a peaceful agreement are considerably reduced. It is therefore advisable to explore one's own anger intensively before speaking to the other person, so that we do not say things in a hurtful way that we later regret.

The first impulse in a trigger like these hate comments will perhaps be to go on the counter-attack or to accuse the other person of not having fulfilled our needs. If we follow this impulse, we portray

ourselves as 'victim' and the other person as 'perpetrator' - and thus solidify the enemy image we have of people 'like this'. The probability that we can then see the other person in his humanity and come to a lasting agreement with him is drastically reduced. A trace of this 'victim'-'perpetrator'-thinking can still be found in Ms. Künast's reaction to the insulting comments: she confronts the 'perpetrators' and thus puts herself in a morally superior position: "Is this how we want to treat each other in a democracy? (9) Confronted in this way, the people addressed would probably see an admission of their 'mistakes' as a submission or a buckling - which would be contrary to their own needs (more on this in the section Empathic Presumption).

Self-responsibility

Making others responsible for meeting our needs also puts us in a dependency on them, which then seems to justify violent forms of communication: demands, pressure, threats and so on. The perspective of non-violent communication is different: "Each of us is responsible for our own thoughts, feelings, [needs] and actions" (10), even if some have much more resources available to them than others.

This also applies to the needs that we need others to fulfill, such as support, connection, acceptance - it is up to us to address or enable their fulfillment when they are 'in the red'. Experience has shown that an invitation, a request to the other person is more promising than a demand, an order or any other measure that triggers pressure on the other person - the latter most likely causes resistance and defiance because it snubs the need for self-determination and respect on the other side. Even less effective are criticism, insinuations, accusations, threats, punishments and abuses, as well as shame, subjugation, intimidation and blackmail. According to M. Rosenberg (11), these are all violent forms of communication because they try to force the other person to change their behavior. Rosenberg calls these procedures "tragic expressions of unfulfilled needs" (12)- tragic because this form of communication virtually prevents us from having our needs fulfilled, or rather their fulfillment in this way costs us a high price, namely the trusting, cooperative, peaceful coexistence.

It is also important to know that it makes no sense to sacrifice one need for another, for example, to give up our authenticity or self-determination in order to be accepted or left alone - this certainly does not lead to us being more satisfied afterwards.

Only if we all take our needs seriously and enter into a dialogue as sovereign subjects - and remain so during the process - is there a chance that a solution can be found that satisfies all parties.

Dissolve enemy images

Expressions such as those Mrs. Künast was confronted with would probably reinforce already existing enemy images in many people, for example 'angry citizens', 'machos', 'Nazis' and so on. Normally our judgements dissolve when we look at our needs and stand up for them, in this case for example for respect, consideration or justice. But sometimes this does not happen and these images continue to dominate our thinking. Then it may even be that we empathetically recognize behind the behavior of the other person that we reject the attempt to fulfill needs, but still cannot let go of the judgment. Here the question arises: what is the benefit for us (what needs do we fulfill) if we force others into such a category? Only when we can see and appreciate these needs hidden in deeper layers within ourselves, can we let go of the enemy images - they were only a strategy to fulfill the hidden needs. For example, if we find it difficult not to classify someone as a Nazi, it may be that our secret aim is to

protect or strengthen our affiliation with those people who are committed to liberating themselves from old Nazi thinking. We can also secure this affiliation in other ways than by putting the stamp of "Nazi" on certain people.

From lack into abundance

This preparatory work with our own feelings and needs - in the context of Nonviolent Communication this is called Self Empathy - is essentially about allowing the full depth of our feelings to be felt, ultimately allowing us to feel how precious the needs associated with them are. Tears may well flow and even old injuries that have not yet been integrated may come back to mind. It can be a great relief to really allow these painful feelings for once, preferably with the support of a friend who holds us and listens to us empathetically without reservation. When we then fully understand the needs involved and recognize them as important qualities in our lives, we can feel how much we wish for their fulfillment because it would make us happier. Then we begin to straighten up inwardly, connect with the importance of their fulfillment and finally take responsibility for getting them.

At this point, we are no longer in a state of thinking in terms of lack, but can direct our open gaze to the other person from a feeling of abundance.

Work of desperation

Joanna Macy has called the preparation for such difficult encounters desperate work (13)). It consists on the one hand, as described above, in fully expressing and acknowledging one's own feelings and needs, which have been awakened by the trigger, in a protected setting. On the other hand, to open ourselves to the feelings and needs of the sender of the trigger in order to be able to see him not as a monster but in his humanity. Without the first part, however, we will not succeed in this second, because as long as we carry judgements or enemy images about the other within us, our heart remains closed.

According to Macy, the third part of the desperate work is then the role play, in which we try to meet someone empathetically who addresses us like the person who had provided us with the trigger.

The construction site model

Graphics: Building site model. (Source: Hamburger Institut für Gewaltfreie Kommunikation / Simran K. Wester (Hrsg): Together for Personal and Social Change)

The site model provides an overview of the different topics of the preparation level (1) and the encounter level (2).

As long as we are on the preparation level, we are not yet in contact with the person whose behavior was a trigger for us. However, we can turn to someone for support in this work. Only on the encounter level do we make contact with our opponent.

Empathic assumption

After we have extensively turned to self-empathy, we now direct our attention to the person opposite - but not yet in real contact, but in thought. We put ourselves in this person's place and try to understand and guess what might have been going on in him at the time when he was behaving in the way that was challenging for us, and how he is probably doing now. Again, it is very helpful to

stick to the model of the four steps or aspects proposed by Rosenberg: the observation, the feelings, the needs and the request that we can hear behind every statement, no matter how strange.

So what did the senders of the comments addressed to Ms. Künast possibly observe, what was the trigger for her reaction? In none of the posts is this directly addressed. Possibly it was Ms. Künast's tweet, which she had sent in July 2016 the night after the killing of the Afghan man who had attacked four people on the S-Bahn in Nuremberg with an axe. Mrs. Künast had asked in her posting why the man could not be incapacitated instead of shooting him. (14) Perhaps it was other statements of hers that were a trigger for these people. Perhaps it was enough that she appeared in the media as an enemy image projection screen for some people - the lack of arguments and questions and the amount of insults in these comments suggests this. Mrs. Künast would do well not to take these insults personally, they say nothing about her and some about the senders. According to Rosenberg they are a tragic expression of unfulfilled needs on the part of these people.

In order to really understand and sympathize with what is going on in someone who is behaving so completely differently from us and who is behaving strangely or even hurtful for us, we can ask ourselves: if we were to behave like this person, if we had written a text like this, for example, so full of insults and insults - what would have to be going on in us? What would we have to have experienced to express ourselves so hateful? How would we feel and what would be our deepest longing?

Hate

What all these comments have in common is the anger and hatred they express. As described above, other feelings are hidden under anger that have to do with unexpressed needs. Experience has shown that fear or some form of it, such as insecurity, powerlessness or helplessness, is harder to bear than anger or hatred. Also other feelings like disappointment, frustration or loneliness.

Who after Arno Green (15) in its childhood not loving parents to submit and for it in itself all needs after acceptance, attention, understanding, proximity, loving care and so on to suppress and despise had to learn, will hate as adult humans rather those as enemies hate and see, who appear needy in this sense or which try to fulfill themselves and others these needs. To dissolve this hatred within oneself will, according to Green, only be successful for those who face their deep, repressed pain and allow it to happen - which might be so frightening for some people that they prefer to keep the hatred for the other, the foreign, the basically human and fight it. In this case it will probably be hopeless to want to have a conversation at eye level - these people need therapeutic help above all to be able to dissolve the traumatic deformation within themselves.

Of course, not all people who express themselves abusively are traumatized in this way described by Green. However, the knowledge of this possible traumatization in people who behave hatefully makes it easier for us to accept when someone does not want to engage in a conversation where an approach could take place.

Resonance

So we put ourselves in the other person's place and 'walk a mile in his shoes'. Our empathy - ability is needed now. We lend him our heart to feel what he feels and to get in touch with the needs that are awake in him. As soon as we succeed in this, we may notice a relief in us, perhaps a sigh of relief. Suddenly we can say: ah okay, now I understand what is probably going on in this person, what he is

probably about. We have gone into resonance - after all, we know these feelings and needs - and can now recognize the other person in all his humanity. Only now will real eye level in the encounter be possible.

It is important to note that recognizing and acknowledging needs in someone else does not mean having to fulfill them. This remains the responsibility of the other person. We can contribute to their fulfilment if we want to, but we are not obliged to do so. Keeping the other person's feelings and needs in mind, however, helps us to stay in empathy and not fall into a mode of defense or justification if we are attacked in conversation.

Whether there is an openness to enter into conversation and find a conciliatory agreement can only be determined if we take the next step and invite this person to such a conversation.

The request - an invitation

We now move on to the actual level of encounter in which we address the other person. Basically it is about asking this person to contribute to our need to understand and be understood, and to our need for peaceful coexistence. We approach him or her with exactly the respect that we want to experience ourselves.

The prerequisite, as described above, is that we are really ready to lay down our 'weapons' - our reservations, criticism, accusations, enemy images and arguments. This willingness to approach our counterpart 'without weapons' and to invite him to a conversation in which he need not fear to be the loser in the end, requires inner serenity and freedom from expectations. Our anger towards this person should have evaporated by this time through the empathy work (building site 1a and 1b), it would only stand in our way. If we notice on the way that we are getting angry again after all, it can be helpful to take some time out of the conversation and clarify through self-empathy what the trigger was for us, what feelings were triggered by it and what needs were alerted - and maybe also what request we have for the person opposite us.

The invitation will adapt in its wording and form to the respective situation - the only important thing is that it is a real request and not a demand. The word 'please' is not necessary - on the contrary, it can look like the polite packaging of a request. A request is always a question, an invitation, and characterized by the fact that it leaves the other person the freedom to respond or not. A no as an answer does not have to be the end of our discussion request, we can always ask what would make it easier for him to accept our request.

Three requests or questions have proven to be very useful for inviting people to such a conversation:

1. whether there is a basic willingness to talk and what time might be suitable?
2. whether the person is willing to talk about topic XY (in the case of Ms. Künast: about the content of the commentary) with the aim of reaching a mutually satisfactory agreement?
3. whether the person is prepared to proceed in this conversation in such a way that both sides are fully heard with their concerns?

Understanding and being understood

If the invited person agrees to these three requests, the meeting can begin. An appointment is made, the goal of the conversation is reaffirmed, and then it is decided who will begin. Normally it is advisable to let the invited person have the precedence and to listen to him or to ask him about his condition in relation to the topic (building site 2b), but it can also be that he would like to listen first and we ourselves can communicate, what goes on in us in relation to the topic (building site 2a)

While we are listening, it can be very helpful, especially after messages that are revealing to us, to summarize them again to make sure that we have heard them correctly. Of course, it may turn out that the needs of the other person are completely different from what we had assumed - but that doesn't matter as long as we keep in mind that we are interested in understanding.

If our counterpart does not speak on the topic we have agreed upon, but instead, for example, puts forward any arguments or accusations, we can - respectfully - interrupt him or her and either remind him or her to return to the agreed upon question, namely which concern (which feelings and needs) had moved him or her to his or her difficult statement or behavior. We can also ask directly: "I would like to understand what was going on in you when you said/ wrote/ did that and what was your concern? Or perhaps even better, offer your own assumption as a question: Is it possible that you were (for example) agitated and irritated when you said/ wrote/ did that, because (for example) solidarity with the victims was important to you?"

Experience has shown that a question that starts with 'why' (Mrs. Künast had asked: why did you send me this mail?) is not well suited to get an answer about the needs of the other person. It is easily understood as a challenge and then leads to a justification.

Whatever the answer is, if we remain in an empathic attitude, we can focus our attention on the underlying needs and make sure we understand them correctly from time to time. At some point, the other person will have the impression that they have really been understood. Then we can thank them for their willingness and ask them if they want to know how we are doing with what we have heard.

If we then want to talk about ourselves, it is advisable to start with a question, such as: Would you like to hear now what your statement / your behavior at the time triggered in me? And then we talk about our feelings and needs (preferably without using the words 'feelings' and 'needs') - and make sure that we don't include any hidden accusations, such as those contained in pseudo-feelings (see above). Just as before with important statements from our counterpart, we can now ask our counterpart to tell us what he or she has heard about points that are particularly important to us. In this way we make sure that we had expressed ourselves clearly.

Finally, we ask this person (if he or she has not already told us) how he or she is doing with what he or she has heard and whether he or she can do anything with it.

So it can go back and forth a few more times until both sides are satisfied and the agreement can be sealed. If a solution is then needed for a particular problem, it will be easy to find one that both sides agree with.

This is of course an ideal course of a conflict resolution meeting and will probably rarely happen in practice. However, experience shows that a firm anchoring of the empathic attitude increases the probability enormously that a real understanding can take place and both will emerge enriched from this conversation.

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