

First nonviolent communication trainer certified in Maine

By Jean English
Columnist

(Oct 3): Lincolnville resident Peggy Smith has been heading for a career related to peace for decades. The retired Rockport Elementary School teacher has a vivid memory from childhood when, on a trip to France, her family visited a cemetery in Normandy for Americans killed on D-Day. She was overwhelmed by the “acres and acres, 360 degrees, of headstones. It was a watershed moment.”

There must be another way for human beings to work through conflicts, she thought.

That interest continued. As a teacher she learned about different kinds of conflict resolution; went to trainings on peace education; and did workshops for other teachers on the subject.

One day she heard Marshall Rosenberg talking about his nonviolent communication method on a "New Dimensions" radio program (newdimensions.org). “I so enjoyed what he was sharing that I went to The Owl & Turtle Bookshop [in Camden], got his book and read most of it right away,” she said.

A few years later, Rockland photographer Olive Pierce, who, at age 75, had been photographing in Iraq, invited Smith to go to one of Rosenberg’s workshops with her.

“We were both very moved by the experience,” said Smith. They came home and started a study group, and later Smith did a nine-day training with Rosenberg in Quebec. Then she started bringing a trainer to Maine to do workshops. This spring, Smith herself became a certified NVC trainer — the only one in Maine and only the second in New England.

Roots of resolution

Marshall Rosenberg, said Smith, grew up poor in Detroit, where he learned that life could be dangerous depending on what a person looks like or what his name is. Humans have the capacity to be cruel to each other, Smith said, but Rosenberg saw that they also have a great capacity to be compassionate. He developed a

lifelong curiosity about what in human nature allows us to be cruel or compassionate.

When his ill grandmother lived with his family, for example, Rosenberg noticed how two uncles helped feed and bathe her. “One was almost always laughing, smiling, joking, singing,” said Smith. “The other was always scowling — even though both were doing exactly the same job.”

“It wasn’t the act that created a reaction but what the two uncles brought to the act.”

Rosenberg realized that external experiences don’t make a person behave a certain way; rather, something within the person stimulates a reaction. This runs counter to our culture, said Smith, where we constantly blame external stimuli for our feelings, saying, “That makes me feel ...” or, “You make me feel ...”

On the other hand, NVC is a simple process that helps us look inside ourselves to ask, “What need in me is being stimulated?” rather than asking “What need is not being met?” The latter implies that someone else is not meeting your needs; it’s manipulative and keeps people trapped, said Smith.

Nonviolent communication teaches us that “we’re not at the mercy of our lifelong pain,” Smith said. The technique “is a process by which I can really transform and heal those early wounds that control a lot of responses in my life. We call those ‘core beliefs.’ Nonviolent communication is a way to find my core beliefs and either keep them or let them go. That’s what keeps me going back. I still go to workshops.”

The importance of empathy

Empathy is an important NVC tool.

“Often,” said Smith, “when we can express our understanding of another person’s need, the other person then has the choice of letting go of the pain he or she is experiencing.”

She gives the example of a child who doesn’t want to get in her car seat. Explaining to the child that you understand that she does not want to get in the seat, but that that’s the only way you’re both going to be able to get somewhere, lets the child know that you empathize with her. Her need has been given voice — it may have been a need for fun, choice, connection, autonomy, touch ... the context would help us guess; she can now more readily accept sitting in the car seat.

“Nonviolent communication is about learning how to have ‘power with’ other people, not power over or under others,” said Smith. “‘Power with’ is a place where everyone’s needs are considered equally important. It doesn’t mean everyone gets what he or she wants. Part of Level 1 NVC training is learning the difference between need and strategy. We’re never in conflict with someone at the level of need; conflict arises at the level of strategy.”

She gives another example: A father asked his teenage son to do something. The son said, “No,” or, “OK” but then didn’t do the task. “Understand,” said Smith, “that when someone says ‘No’ to something, he is also saying ‘Yes’ to something. Can I be self-connected enough to be curious about what they’re saying ‘Yes’ to?” In this case, instead of engaging in the usual parent-teen “dance,” the father used his NVC training: He took a breath and then said, “I’m wondering why you’re saying ‘No.’” His son was so surprised that the dance had changed that he was prompted to tell his father, “I’m meeting the guys, we’re going out, but I’ll do it on Friday.” His father was ecstatic; he had a connection with his son.

With NVC, said Smith, you can take relationships that seem to be in a rut and give people the tools to change their patterns.

One man who took Smith’s NVC training told her about some long-held feelings relating to his time in Vietnam. It was the first time, he said, that he was able to tell his story without having someone feel sorry for him — instead, just having someone listen. “Being able to offer to others the gift of empathy is amazingly healing,” said Smith. She said that the noted psychologist Carl Rogers (under whom Rosenberg studied) believed that the more someone was trained to use empathy and the more one practiced that skill, “that is what really seemed to heal people.”

On a broader scale, Smith related an experience she heard about between a man who had engaged in acts of terrorism in Northern Ireland, and George Mitchell: When asked what caused the man to become a pacifist, he said, “George Mitchell listened me to death.”

In this case and others, when we’re worked up about something, it can be helpful to get empathy from a third, neutral party, Smith said, “so that we’re not trying to get empathy from the person who stimulated our pain.”

This tool is “beautiful,” Smith added, because “everyone can learn the skills of empathy. It’s a really simple tool.”

Like meditation or learning a foreign language, the skill is simple in concept but takes practice. Smith said it took four or five years before she felt competent, partly because “our culture teaches us to judge everything as right or wrong” and

to label everything. “Any label is a way that I distance myself from somebody else,” she said.

Meeting needs

“So NVC is a different way of thinking,” Smith said. “I suspend judgment of right and wrong to thinking about what needs are in play in this moment — for me and for you, because all humans have the same needs. When I get to a needs level, that’s a place where I can be connected with everybody, because we have the same needs.”

“We use the word ‘need’ differently than we often use it in our culture,” she said. “My needs are a living energy inside of me that makes me a human and not a pine tree. All humans have the same energetic needs inside of them — for empathy, fun, effectiveness, honoring agreements, growth and learning, rest; they are physiological, psychological and spiritual needs. I own my feelings because I connect them to the needs inside of me.”

Workshops

At Level 1 NVC workshops, participants develop their skills at empathy and learn the four steps of a nonviolent communication conversation: making an observation; connecting to one’s feelings; discovering what needs are stimulating those feelings; and learning how to make requests so that someone might respond to a need out of choice instead of out of obligation, guilt, fear, shame or duty.

There are many answers and methods for resolving conflicts, said Smith; there’s “nothing magical about NVC. What I enjoy about it is that Marshall Rosenberg distilled a lot of the essences of many different practices into a very simple, powerful form. I get that feedback over and over again.”

“Numerous therapists and health care people, even those who’ve been doing therapy for years, are very moved by the depth to which they’ve learned something about empathy,” she said.

The power of NVC — seeing how much shift people experience in just a two-day workshop — led Smith to give up her teaching career and devote herself full time to NVC. “There’s a hope that patterns can change,” she said.

Through her business, Open Communication, Smith offers Level 1 and 2 trainings and some theme workshops in Maine. Theme workshops might include, for instance, a weekend focusing on empathy; or using NVC in our closest relationships or in parenting. She also gives a year-long NVC deepening program, in which participants meet five times for a total of 17 days over a nine-month

period.

This November, said Smith, “the John Street Methodist Church in Camden is making a gift to the community” by paying her to give a Level 1 workshop at the church, “because they believe that conflict can be a place for deepening connection — not a place where someone either wins or gives up.” The introductory session on Friday, Nov. 6, from 7:30 to 9 p.m., will be free and open to everybody in the community. The workshop will continue on Saturday, Nov. 7, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.; and on Nov. 10, Nov. 17 and Dec. 1 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. These events are also free and are open to the first 50 people who register. An optional \$10 donation is requested to cover printing and other costs.

To contact Smith, visit opencommunication.org, e-mail peggy@mainencnetwork.org or call 789-5299. The statewide Web site for NVC is mainencnetwork.org.