

In depth

Prayer: a personal relationship

Bridget Belgrave writes about using Nonviolent Communication (NVC) to explore how and why we pray – or don't

When I was eight years old, my family returned to England after living in New York for three years. We were attending a service in a village church near my grandfather's house when suddenly everyone stood up and mumbled together the words that I now know as the Creed, one of the most important professions of faith in the Church of England – 'I believe in ...' and a long list of what they said they believed in. It shocked me. The words sounded strange, but at that age I wasn't too focused on the meaning.

I thought prayer would be something special, sincere. It didn't sound like these people believed what they were saying. My trust in organised religion wilted

What bothered me was the sound. It was the same sound I'd heard at the start of every school day in New York. On my first day, in assembly, everyone suddenly stood up and mumbled together some words while facing a big flag with stars and stripes on it: 'I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the nation...' And somewhere in there came the word 'God' too. Of course, aged five, I stood up like everyone else. After a few weeks, I got the hang of the words and I mechanically 'pledged allegiance to the flag' every school day for three years.

So, in the village church, aged eight, I felt disappointed. I thought prayer would be something special, sincere. It didn't sound like these people believed what they were saying. My trust in organised religion wilted.

However, I had made up my own prayer, without calling it by that name. When terrified in my bed at night, I would call out (silently of course, as no one knew about this), 'Angels, angels, angels, angels, angels.' Within two minutes, a soothing energy would arrive all around me and calm me, so I could fall asleep.

Reflecting on this, I sense that the desire to pray, to reach out for help into the unknown, was deep within me. I wonder if everyone has a desire to pray in a part of themselves? Perhaps, other parts of them, influenced by negative experiences or intellectual beliefs, have buried it. Perhaps, for some, it does not get buried, but becomes channelled into religious practices that are not a comfortable fit. It seems a few emerge into adulthood with their desire to pray unscathed, and experience deep, meaningful prayer throughout their lives.

Thirty years later, I was lucky enough to have my desire to pray revived. I lived and worked for three months in a place where people prayed with just the sincerity, aliveness and authenticity that I had missed as a child.

Prayer is a very sensitive topic. For some, it matters deeply. Others think it is meaningless, or part of an oppressive social system

It was one of several *Communautés de L'Arche* in France, founded by Lanza del Vasto, an Italian Catholic, who had spent some time with Gandhi in India and was inspired to found a community based on living together non-violently. It was the first time I had focused on this word 'nonviolence' and I experienced what it meant to these people in all areas of their lives, including prayer. A quite unique energy was generated that I still cannot describe. I loved it.

Shortly after that, back in England, I saw a tiny line advert for a monthly Nonviolent Communication (NVC) open evening. I'd never heard of NVC. Indeed, it was virtually unknown at the time. As I was sorely missing the atmosphere of *L'Arche*, the word 'nonviolent' caught my eye, and I made sure to go.

I arrived late to find four women, one of whom (I understood later) had been on the first 10-day international training with Marshall Rosenberg, the creator of NVC. At the end of the evening, I didn't understand at all what NVC was, but I noticed the woman facilitating had listened to me in an unusual way.

While driving home, I felt a strange sensation, like something deep in my torso was being rearranged. That really impressed me. I went back each month. My problematic temper outbursts at home gradually diminished. I'd tried for years to heal this pattern, without success. Now, the change was internal and structural, not simply behavioural, and it lasted. What an enormous gift. So, when I heard that Marshall Rosenberg would give a one-day workshop in the UK, I signed up. I still couldn't describe what NVC was, but I knew it was important to me.

At this point in my life, I was 18 years into an intensive path of personal development, which was also my profession. I wove together the Alexander technique, energy healing, EST, psychosynthesis, Gestalt therapy, focusing, effective intelligence and spiritual practices. Yet NVC was different. I was intensely curious about what the day would bring.

There was a small group sitting in a circle. At the focal point sat a man in his early 60s: Marshall. He began speaking, listening to us, and occasionally singing a simple song with his guitar. After two hours, the energy in the room had palpably changed. It was like a weaving. Everyone was connected. Something subtle yet substantial filled the room. You could have cut it with a cake slice and given someone a piece. I now know this to be an outcome of listening from presence.

Propelled by this experience, I went to an international training with Marshall. There, a photocopy was floating around. On it were some Chinese characters and these words, written in calligraphy:

It is as though he listened
and such listening as his
enfolds us in a silence
in which at last we begin to hear
what we are meant to be.

*Lao Tze**

Listening from presence, described 2,500 years ago! I took this quote home, and it still touches me deeply. Whenever I share it at workshops, my hair stands on end. To be inclusive, I also say a version with she/hers. (I've read that the Chinese language was originally genderless, so this may be a fair rendition.) For me, it describes the essence of NVC, and as each year passes, it reveals something deeper. Nowadays, I even find in it a secular description of prayer.

NVC can be described as a set of principles and practices that increase empathy, honesty, connection and compassion. Combining these practices develops people's ability to listen from presence to others, and also to themselves. Natural growth then happens. Marshall Rosenberg called it 'evolution'.

How I value the freedom to each choose our own way, and to be fully ourselves, especially in such an intimate thing as prayer

NVC was developed by Marshall as he identified the tragic habits of thought and language that generate violence, whether in daily life or large-scale conflicts. He also studied the ways of being that generate compassion. He was moved by the nonviolent activism of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. He chose the name Nonviolent Communication to align his work with their insights about speaking one's own truth while respecting the 'enemy' fully, not reacting to their provocations, and letting this 'truth force' or 'love' transform the situation.

So, NVC is designed to be empowering as well as healing. It is known for many things – improving relationships of all kinds, resolving conflicts, deepening self-connection, supporting social change and much more. But prayer? Not really. And yet, I've been discovering that the practice of NVC offers a very supportive space in which to explore our personal relationship to prayer.

Over the years, I've run workshops to offer this kind of space for people who know the basics of NVC. With COVID lockdowns, this became an online course, open to people who pray and people who don't, of any religion or none. Being online brings in participants from several continents and cultures, which enriches the exploration for everyone.

Yet, prayer is a very sensitive topic. For some, it matters deeply. Others think it is meaningless, or part of an oppressive social system. It can easily feel unsafe to share our feelings about it with a group of strangers. Hence the NVC pre-requisite, to ensure everyone shares an intention to be non-judgmental and respectful of difference, and has some skills to make this intention a reality.

People learning NVC become increasingly aware of not only the overt ways but also the subtle ways we judge each other; for example, through interpretations disguised as 'feelings' (I feel you are dominating the discussion), or disguised as observations (I hear you making absurd claims). This range of critical, judgmental, disconnecting thoughts is sometimes affectionately called 'jackal language'. The playful term helps us not to judge the judge, and to see it as a language issue.

'Jackal language' always expresses something important but is interwoven with external or internal blame and criticism. This leads to disconnection, distrust and hurt. NVC invites us to look out for 'jackal thoughts' in ourselves, and to translate them into clearer, richer, needs-based expression, which is self-responsible and much more likely to generate connection.

It is with trust in this shared understanding that, near the start of the course, I can safely ask: 'Have you prayed today? If not, why not?' It is not a threatening question. It is an open enquiry, full of curiosity.



Participants respond with free-flow writing in the chat:

- No! It's a waste of time
- Yes, when I woke up
- Life is too busy
- Forgetting I have the power to help
- Too tired
- Old way of praying no longer feels like me
- Don't trust anyone is listening
- Yes, while doing stuff
- I had to take my dog to the vet
- I'm not disciplined enough
- People like me don't pray
- I did, and it made all the difference to today.

Already, we have such rich material to explore. Already, people are taking small risks by honestly revealing something about their relationship to prayer. Our diverse experiences are all equally held with care and respect. The NVC principle that no one is right or wrong supports this inclusion.

We read the chat and listen to each other, hearing the observations, feelings, needs and requests disguised in the jackal language. This makes it easier to relate, and to sustain inclusion and respect.

Throughout the course, I encourage participants to continually notice and transform triggers – those words and moments that throw them into disconnection and reactivity. Anything to do with religion, spirituality and prayer is full of potential triggers. One person's most sacred word is another's suffering, so there are lots of opportunities to practise this. How healing and growthful it is to acknowledge and attend to this together.

Considering how triggered I can be in religious settings, I was surprised how much I enjoyed a moment when I was taking part in an art workshop that was using a Christian centre as a venue. At lunch, a 20-something-year-old resident, inspired by something she heard, raised her hand above her head between mouthfuls and called out with verve and authenticity, 'Praise the Lord!' It was so good to see her allow those life qualities of gratitude, awe and humility to flow through her and be expressed freely and publicly.

I am grateful to NVC for helping me understand that it is these life qualities – the 'universal human needs' as NVC calls them – that really matter to me. They matter much more than the words or actions intended to express them. This awareness grew in me through the NVC practice of distinguishing between needs and the strategies intended to meet those needs. Needs – such as beauty, fun, safety and companionship – are universal. They are valued by everyone. Strategies are ideas for actions that could meet needs. They are forms things take. This is where conflict often occurs. It can be hard to agree on strategies without sensing the needs behind them.

The word 'Lord' used to be a form – a 'strategy' – that was a trigger for me. Having explored this, I now rarely use the word 'Lord' myself, but it no longer bothers me when others do. So, I could totally enjoy and resonate with this person's spontaneous prayer, 'Praise the Lord!'

There is one more principle integral to NVC that I find extremely important around spirituality: not imposing our idea of what is right on others. How I wish this principle would be embedded in people's communication and behaviour, worldwide. How I value the freedom to each choose our own way, and to be fully ourselves, especially in such an intimate thing as prayer.

Naturally, the course is not equally valuable for everyone; but very often, as we explore through these NVC principles and practices, and listen to each other's prayer stories from presence, we 'begin to hear what we are meant to be'. Something becomes clarified. There is no right outcome, only the emergent truth for each person. We experience acceptance by others, and arrive at a place of self-acceptance of our own, personal, relationship to prayer.

* To my surprise and delight, I subsequently found this text quoted in *A Way of Being*, by Carl Rogers (Mariner Books, 1980).

Biography



Bridget Belgrave is an international NVC trainer, facilitator and coach. She works with individuals, couples and groups on inner and interpersonal growth. She integrates nonviolence, spirituality and embodied processes for healing people and caring for all life. She co-created the NVC Dance Floors (a learning methodology published in 18 languages) and is author of *Zak* (a children's book). www.liferesources.org.uk