Heartful Communication for Audible

Liz Kingsnorth May 2021

These are extraordinary times. So much of what we call our 'normal life' has been thrown up in the air like pieces of a puzzle and the pieces are landing - if at all they do land, in a different pattern. Or there may not even be any recognizable pattern. Amidst this uncertainty and turmoil, we find our relationships under greater pressure. There seems to be conflict and misunderstanding at all levels, whether within ourselves or between family members, or at work, within our countries and between nations. The global guide of Heartfulness meditation, Shri Kamlesh Patel, affectionately known as Daaji, said recently: "Communication is the need of the hour".

Many of us are longing to have more harmonious relationships, to communicate more effectively, to get more satisfying outcomes. Additionally, at a deeper level, we want to interact in a way that feels in alignment with our core selves, with our best version of ourselves. This would give us an anchor to hold steady in the turbulent waves of daily life. I hear people saying things like: "I want to feel at peace at the end of the day". No-one wants the heaviness that can result from misunderstandings and disagreement. I'm sure that we *prefer* to manage interactions with care, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. We want to feel heard and valued, to listen well to others, but we are often unclear how to achieve this consistently. Heartful Communication sets out to meet this need. One woman, after a workshop, wrote simply: "I've always known how I want to live my life and now I have the tools to do it".

However, this is not just a set of techniques or a tool-kit, it's a way of being, a consciousness. It weaves together a heart-centred approach to living, with practical ways to manifest this in our daily interactions. Techniques and wisdom from Heartfulness meditation are interwoven with a process called Nonviolent Communication, or NVC, that was developed by Dr Marshall B Rosenberg. Both approaches are heart-centred and honour our human-ness, recognizing that we are imperfect beings with shared yearnings and shared vulnerabilities.

So how would it be if we used these very yearnings and vulnerabilities as a valuable, alive way to realise the power of unity and what we have in common - rather than as evidence of our weakness or collective failure as a species? This lived experience of togetherness is something that Heartful Communication enables - as I shall attempt to explain in this talk.

Here's a question to consider: Does each of us communicate from our current level of consciousness? If so, then the more we can raise our consciousness and refine our inner state, the more likely it is that our interactions will be refined. The more our capacity for love expands, the more compassion and authenticity will then be infusing our connections with others - and with ourselves. So, meditation, with its power to raise our awareness and to connect us with our deepest centre, can hold a key to helping us develop a more balanced, open-hearted way of living and relating.

But, even with the best intentions, the noblest of ideals and values, we mess up. We say things we regret, we trigger hurt in others - and often we don't know how it happened. We misunderstand and are misunderstood. We can be our own worst enemy, especially, ironically, in our closest relationships. Isn't this where the toughest tests often arise?

It's helpful to remind ourselves that we are the product of our cultural conditioning. Most of us are educated from birth to compete, to compare, to judge, to think in terms of who is right and who is wrong, who is better or worse, what is normal behaviour, what is abnormal. This has led us into a fractured culture where blaming and shaming are the norm. And this manifests in our day to day communications, in how we raise our children, in our education systems, our businesses, our politics. Instead of wanting to CONNECT, we want to CORRECT. As Marshall Rosenberg says: "We are habitually playing the game of Who is right!"

Can you take a moment to reflect: When have I wanted to be right recently? When have I insisted on something, tried to prove a point perhaps? And if I won that round of the game and proved myself to be right, how do I suppose the other person felt? And how did I feel deep down? Was it really satisfying to have won a point – perhaps at the cost of the other person feeling embarrassed, resentful or small? Did I win the argument but damage the relationship? What's the effect on my heart and on the other's heart? Is winning, being right, actually worth it?

This way of thinking and conditioning starts early in our lives. I'd like to share a story told by a friend in India, about her daughter in primary school. The teacher set up a running race and told the children that whoever won, should grab as many chocolates as possible from the bowl. My friend's daughter won the race but took only one chocolate. She was actually scolded by the teacher for being disobedient – she had been told to grab lots of sweets and she didn't. When the distressed child came home and was asked by her mother what happened, she cried: "If I had taken lots of chocolates, there wouldn't have been enough for everyone". Her natural inclination was to share, to think of others, but here she was being "educated" out of her natural way of being, into winning at the expense of others.

It's revealing to consider these questions: What is it that we reward? How do we respond to mistakes? Do we manage our interactions in a way that maximises the value of every human being? I was very inspired when I first heard about African communities that are rooted in the strength of Interdependence rather than Independence - the philosophy of Ubuntu. One Ubuntu practice that especially moves me is this: when someone makes a serious mistake – what we would probably call a crime in our society, that person sits surrounded by their community, and for two days, everyone reminds him or her of all the good, kind things they have done! The idea is that the person has temporarily forgotten their true nature, so we will remind you of who you *really* are. Having been deeply affirmed and restored through this expression of acceptance, love and trust, that person is extremely unlikely to repeat the mistake.

This is a philosophy that has redemption at its core. Isn't the possibility of redemption central to a humane society? How radically different this is from our idea that shame and punishment will reform us, starting with young children, all the way through to our criminal justice system. We could ask ourselves: If I shame someone, whether through speech or action, am I not inevitably shaming myself?

Our individual existence rests in all of humanity. Whatever I may think of the human race, I am inextricably part of it! Each of us can and does make a difference to the whole, however small, in how we live each moment. And we cannot know what the extended effects might be. I remember one day, driving on a highway and stopping at a toll to pay my fee. To my surprise the toll attendant told me that the person in the car in front of me, had paid for me! Apparently, it was Random Acts of Kindness Day – which I wasn't aware of, and this gesture of drivers paying for the one behind them in the queue, had been going on for an hour or so. In delight, I paid the toll fee

for the car behind me, and I heard later that this chain of paying for another, continued unbroken for most of the day.

I'm sure that this repeated small gesture, this random act of kindness, will have generated smiles and opened hundreds of hearts that day, perhaps changing someone's dark mood with a result that they treated people differently? We don't know, but we do know that we enjoy experiences that connect us together. This is the intention of Heartful Communication. How we communicate can contribute to the warmth of connection and unity, or to the chill of separation... it can contribute to our evolution or to our diminishment.

Marshall Rosenberg suggests that underlying all our actions, our words, the choices we make, are human needs, aspirations, longings that we want to fulfil. These are the motivators for our behavior. Needs like safety, justice, care, belonging, to be heard, to have a sense of self-worth, to have purpose or meaning, to be accepted, to grow, to share, to have fun, to have peace. We do what we do and we say what we say in order to try to meet a particular need. And these needs are life-serving, in their essence, they positively contribute to life. Some needs are easy to understand, for example going for a promotion to ensure security for the family; spending time on social media to try to meet a need for connection; complaining about loud music because you have a need for peace to relax.

Other behaviours are more tricky, not so easy to understand. For example, not telling the truth. What needs might be underlying this choice? I imagine each of us has said things at times that are not true, perhaps because we wanted to protect someone from hurt or we might have been trying to protect ourselves from criticism. Our need, our motivation is to protect. If a child denies breaking a window, when we are sure they did break it, our first reaction might be to scold them for not telling the truth. We might brand the child as a liar and thereafter doubt their word. If we feel into what could be the child's need underlying their denial, is it not self-protection? A need that we all share. Perhaps they were punished in the past when they had made a mistake and owned up to it, so they have learned it's not safe to tell the truth in such circumstances.

So how might we support a child to be honest, other than through punishing them, again, for lying? Whenever they acknowledge they have made a mistake... "yes I broke this thing", "yes it was me who ate Mum's chocolate"... can we welcome their honesty, their open-ness, affirm how we all mess up at times, and then join with them in thinking through how the mistake could be sorted out? In other words, we replace the use of fear with trust, with respect, with love.

So here's a key shift in our awareness that HC offers – to refocus our attention away from the behaviors that we judge, that we like or don't like, away from the critical mindset that reinforces separateness, to this: holding an intention to become aware of, to perceive and understand what may be underlying anyone's words and actions... that is, the shared human needs or values. This one way to understand human behavior, an awareness that opens our hearts and enables us to realise our connectedness. It's a choice. Awareness brings choice. This choice can be liberating for us and for those with whom we are relating.

Let's take an ordinary example of a family argument between a parent who is so frustrated about their teenager constantly being on their mobile phone with friends, even during mealtimes and late into the night - and they forcibly remove the phone. The teenager disappears into their room in a rage and refuses to come out. There's a major stand-off. The *way* that the parent and the teenager express their needs, what we can call the strategies that they use to try to fulfill their

needs, are infuriating to the other - that is, the teenager being on the phone almost full-time, then isolating themselves, is infuriating to the parent. And likewise, the parent wanting boundaries and then forcibly taking the phone, enrages the child. When we look beneath these strategies, these choices of actions, we can find what really matters to each of them, that is the needs or values that are the motivators. The parent longs for their child to be healthy, and to participate in the togetherness of family life. The teenager on the phone, wants connection and friendship with their peers, to belong. Plus, as a young adult, they value autonomy, having some independence, to make their own choices.

The problem, the conflict, lies at the level of the actions, the strategies, not at the level of the underlying needs, because these we all can understand and experience – they are shared by all human beings. Not necessarily at the same time of course, and not necessarily with the same intensity, but nevertheless we can relate to them all. The parent can understand their child's wish for connection and autonomy, the teen can relate to a need for health and togetherness. In fact, the need for connection is common to both in this situation, isn't it? The solution to the conflict, to any conflict, lies in recognizing and respecting all the underlying needs, then looking for new creative ways, different strategies for *everyone's* needs to be taken into account. Not A's way or B's way but a third way. Which is why families all over the world endeavor to come up with agreements about phones and no-phone times – agreements that all parties can feel okay with.

Can you take a few moments now, maybe pause this recording, and let's do a short exercise to help us understand this concept of underlying needs as motivators for everything that people say and do. Let's start with why have you chosen to listen to this talk? What needs are you hoping to meet by hearing what I am offering?
PAUSE
Okay now let's feel into what might be the needs or values that someone is trying to fulfill when they do the following... and remember, we don't have to like or agree with the behaviours.
1. Bullying. 2. A child having a temper tantrum when they are left out of a game. 3. Telling your partner how much you enjoy their cooking! What could be the underlying needs in these examples?
PAUSE
What did you come up with? When you thought about what might be someone's underlying needs when they are bullying, did you sense that they might have a poor sense of self-esteem and want to be seen as powerful, to feel that they are someone? So there might be a need there for recognition? As we know, bullies have usually experienced being bullied in some way themselves and have experienced helplessness with its resulting anger.

How about the child who is having a tantrum – isn't their need for inclusion, of longing to be with the other kids – but they haven't learned how to express this longing in a calm way.
And when we tell someone how much we enjoy their cooking, did you guess that expressing appreciation can fulfill a need, our need, to contribute to someone else's happiness? Of course, we might also have an agenda of making sure we get a meal tomorrow too!!
Anyway, I am convinced that wanting to contribute to the wellbeing of others, is one of the deepest human needs.

Marshall Rosenberg offers us this thought, that "Every criticism, judgment and expression of anger, is the tragic expression of an unmet need." It's tragic because those forms of expression hurt others and hurt our own hearts. The vital shift, the key, is to be open to seeing human behavior through this lens of the heart, and to express ourselves and get our needs fulfilled in

more healthy, loving ways. If we become aware of what we are longing for, what our needs are when we are angry or criticizing, it's a shift away from blaming others, and a step into taking responsibility for our feelings.

Listening, deep attentive listening, is a cornerstone of Heartful Communication. We all want to be listened to, to be heard for what is important to us. Often we want to be listened *to* more than we want to listen! In his book: "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People", Stephen Covey offers us a habit, a practice, that can transform our interactions: "Seek to understand *before* you are understood", he suggests. If we have an intention to really listen and understand the other person first, this creates a warm connection and opens the field between us for dialogue. Any communication starts with our intention. In HC our intention is connection: at the deepest level to be connected with Source, to be connected with our own heart, and to be in connection with what may be in the heart of another person – what is alive in them, what matters to them in this moment. So we listen.

We can listen in a range of ways. We can listen in attentive silence, offering our alert presence, communicating acceptance, respect or care, without words. Or we might need to listen for factual information, for example in a work meeting, and then we can check back with the speaker if what we have picked up is accurate.

Perspective taking is another way to listen. Paying attention and acknowledging someone's perspective or opinion, particularly when it is very different from our own, requires us to be centred and to let go of any urge to persuade them they are wrong! If our intention is connection not correction, we first listen for *their* way of seeing things and then we can reflect back to them our understanding of their perspective. "So your view is that vaccination should be compulsory for everyone, irrespective of age or medical conditions, is that accurate?" Remember, we don't need to agree with their perspective! But when someone feels accurately heard and respected, not argued with, not judged, they are much more likely to be open to hearing your perspective also.

Another level of listening is to listen for how a person is feeling and offer back to them verbally what we perceive are their feelings. For example, someone might say: "My husband is never at home, he's married to his job!" Even though feelings are not explicitly named here, we might sense that this person is in pain about her situation, that she has feelings of frustration and anger, perhaps loneliness or even despair. We may find, if we tentatively respond to this outburst by asking if they are feeling a bit despairing and alone, the person is relieved. She is being heard. Here is someone trying to understand her experience, to recognize what is going on inside her.

What matters is that we don't fall into the habit of immediately trying to fix things or make light of the situation! Habitual responses might be consoling: "Never mind, at least he does come home!", or pity "Oh poor you!", or giving immediate advice – when the person may want to be heard not fixed. Sometimes we even tell the person not to feel what they are feeling: "Don't be angry" or "Don't be sad". Or here's a very common interruption, telling our own similar story: "Oh I'm in the same situation..." And off we go with our own story, often with a sort of one-upmanship, like our situation is even more horrible than theirs! All these responses I call Circuit Breakers, because they can so quickly break the flow of connection and cut across the person's need to express themselves. We jump in and reply with what comes instantly into our mind. Stephen Covey wrote: "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply". It's not that we should eliminate these responses altogether; at times they

may be what someone wants to hear, but not as a first reaction. It's often an issue of timing and being sensitive to their need to express at first without interruption.

Can you take a moment now and reflect: Which circuit breakers am I aware of that I use? Do I tend to immediately give advice? Do I rush to identify with their experience and start telling about my own?
Whatever you discover, simply notice... I have this habit or I have this tendency when I am hearing about someone's problem. You might also like to reflect how you feel if someone responds in any of these circuit breaker ways, when *you* are needing to share something that is going on for you.
[PAUSE]
What we are often yearning for from our listener, is empathy, that they are willing to imagine our unique world, to gently step into our experience and affirm it. Heartful Communication teaches us to be centred in our hearts and listen so carefully that we can hear or sense what someone may be longing for, that is their needs, as well as their feelings, even when they don't articulate them clearly. So, an empathic response to our example of: "My husband is never at home, he's married to his job!" might sound something like this: "I guess you're feeling really fed up and alone and would love to have more quality time together with your husband?" We tune into her longing for companionship even though it is being expressed indirectly as an exasperated complaint.

When people receive empathy in this way, they often feel a deep relief, an easing of pressure. Their need to be heard and understood is met. It's nourishing. Keeping a loving intention and focusing on what matters to someone, what is alive in them in the present moment - this life energy of feelings and needs, does take commitment and practice. But people who have integrated it into their way of relating, affirm that it's one of the most transformative communication skills that we can develop.

Being able to keep in connection with our hearts, to stay calm and listen under pressure, is more challenging. Yet if we can do it, if we can empathise with someone who is angry with us, hostility can change to harmony in a remarkably quick time. I remember one time when I encountered a situation that needed immediate implementation of this consciousness and skill.

I was living in a house with no access to the back garden except through my neighbour's garden. I was in the middle of major renovation work, involving rocks, bags of cement, huge timbers and soil. My neighbour had agreed to allow the workmen to come through his garden with their heavy loads, to access my ground.

We were a couple of weeks into the project with a lot more to be completed, when I woke one morning to find that he had bolted the gate between our gardens and had piled up furniture behind it as a barricade. Clearly he had decided to put a stop to the work! I could hear him banging stuff loudly behind the fence and was pretty sure he was angry. If the gate stayed locked, that would be the end of my garden renovation! "I need to go listen to this man", I thought and went out to meet him.

I began quietly using neutral observation: "Hello ___, I see the gate is locked today...". He immediately exploded, shouting: "You think you can just go on like this every day with these idiots invading my garden like it's a public road!" I chose to listen for his feelings and what his needs were in this moment and replied: "Are you really angry because you want your privacy

respected"? "Yes!" he roared, "I don't know who the hell these people are or when this damned work is going to be over. I've had enough!"

Although I was alarmed, I remembered that he was angry because of valid unmet needs and so tried again to empathise with what mattered to him. "I guess you want to meet the guys and know what the time-frame is for completing?" "Of course! And see that shed up there?" he said, "That's my home office with all my files and my computer inside!" I responded: "Oh wow, I can see why you're worried about security and want to be sure your stuff is safe?"

He was calming down slightly now but had more to express that was upsetting him: "And see those plants – THAT is salad! I'm trying to have a garden and your buffalos are trampling over everything!" "I'm really sorry", I said, "It's really important that they keep to the path and take care". There were a couple more of these interchanges with him expressing what he was angry about and me listening for his feelings and needs and doing my best to reflect back to him what I understood. I could see him gradually getting calmer.

The whole thing took less than 10 minutes, and then, to my surprise, he suddenly said: "Well, alright, I can see you have to get the work done... I'll open the gate when they come!" I was taken aback at how fast things had shifted. I hadn't protested or defended my situation at all. I quickly thanked him and assured him I would ask the workmen to clarify the time-frame, and that I would talk with them about taking care going through his garden and so on. The project was completed amicably. This is the power of deep, empathic listening that's possible even under pressure, and it's one of the most important aspects of Heartful Communication, whether at home or at work, in any situation.

So, learning new habits, of listening instead of defending ourselves, or becoming aware when we are triggered and then choosing to respond differently, are ways to liberate us from the prison of judgement and reactivity. As Viktor Franckl suggests: "There is a space between the stimulus and the response; in this space we have the choice of our response, and in this choice lies our evolution and our freedom". Cultivating the discipline, the power of pausing, the intention to understand before we are understood, can be achieved so much more easily when we have a practice of meditation that can bring ever-increasing calmness and balance inside.

This is a journey where we endeavour to transcend our conditioning and re-weave a web of caring, warm relatedness, where the well-being of each one of us and all of us together, matters more than pursuing our individual well-being. Where we go beyond our cut off, separate identities towards a more shared sense of oneness as an entire human family, in which each one flourishes and contributes in service to the divine jewel shining through each unique human being.