

Articles

Dorset Campbell-Ross looks for peaceful solutions to conflict

Connecting with compassion

The air around the morgue was thick with the stench of death. It permeated my body and stuck to my clothing like glue. The city ice supply was exhausted. Eighty bodies were piled up inside and more were waiting outside in trucks. As my stomach turned I could feel myself becoming nauseated and disgusted that such violence could happen.

Few people are prepared to deal with such carnage and the heartbreak and anger that accompany it. But last October I was on holiday in Bali and soon after the Sari nightclub exploded in a fireball, found myself head of the crisis centre where friends and families came to find out about the ghastly fate of their loved ones. I had initially volunteered as a counsellor, and having an overview of the crisis centre operation, I offered to be manager.

Suddenly I was juggling a lot of balls at once. I had to deal with logistics, meeting officials — Australian and Indonesian — organise a system to process those looking for missing people, and another to counsel those who were overwhelmed by feelings of grief, anger and hopelessness. I delegated like mad and although fearful that people might think I was bossy, everyone worked as a team with co-operation amid the chaos. I felt so full of love and pride for everyone it bought tears to my eyes.

In the months before Bali I had been immersed in learning the art of nonviolent communication (NVC). Ghandi defined nonviolence as 'the state of compassion that exists when violence has subsided from the heart'. NVC is a process of communicating with people in a heart-felt manner — in a way that allows our natural compassion to flourish. In this way it fosters deep listening, respect and empathy. NVC enabled me to handle the crisis centre in Bali. It gave me the emotional and verbal tools and structure.

What began four years ago as a mild interest has now become my passion. While working as a workshop leader specialising in intimate relationships at Findhorn Foundation, I first heard of NVC and thought it was just another method of conflict resolution. My interest was sparked, however, hearing that Dr Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of NVC, was a mediator between countries at war.

Marshall has mediated in Palestine, Israel, Croatia, Africa, the southern states of

America and elsewhere. Growing up in Detroit he experienced racial discrimination and violence first hand, and this led him to wonder what happens to disconnect us from our compassionate nature leading us to behave violently and exploitatively. He realised the crucial role of language and empathy from people who managed to remain compassionate, even under dire circumstances.

In 1999 I attended his workshop on mediation. I had my first direct experience of NVC in Ireland last year when I was contacted by a former participant and invited to do a NVC workshop in her hometown of Kilkenny.

It transpired that there was a conflict going on between the Irish volunteers and the African refugees. By the time I arrived it had degenerated to the point that the leaders of the two parties refused to be in the same room together, let alone talk. I was asked to mediate. I felt hopelessly inadequate for the job, having only done one day of NVC and two on mediation.

The chairman of the Africans was almost seven foot tall with hands as big as shovels. The head of the volunteers was a fiery red headed Irishman. Three times voices were raised and threats were made to abandon the talk, but I used my basic NVC knowledge and mediation skills and after two hours they agreed to return the next day.

The next day's two-hour session concluded with them shaking hands, agreeing to work together, and enthusiastic about bringing their teams to my workshop on NVC, which I gave the following day. The result was that my first mediation and my first workshop for 25 participants were both resounding successes. I was ecstatic and amazed that I could get such results with so little experience. Imagine, I thought, how it would be if I really lived this stuff? How would it change my life and my relationships?

Immediately I booked in to the next International Intensive Training with Marshall Rosenberg, in Switzerland the following month. The course lasted nine days. As it progressed I found myself literally coming to life — crying, laughing, getting angry.

I discovered my cultural conditioning had led me to focus attention on places where I didn't get what I wanted. When I felt uncomfortable, upset or angry, I invariably made someone wrong, and blamed him or her for my discomfort. This

judgement resulted in them being uncomfortable, blaming me, and another conflict arising.

Instead of habitual, automatic reactions such as defending, withdrawing or attacking in the face of judgement, I learned to make conscious responses based on an awareness of what I was perceiving, feeling, and wanting.

Having witnessed in Bali the horror of what happens when people disconnect from the heart, I feel a burning passion to educate people, including children, in NVC. To me, it is the most effective strategy for creating peace in the world.

My dream is to see a NVC

community here that will blossom, flourish across the country, and link up with other NVC communities worldwide.

I invite like-minded people to join me taking NVC into schools, workplaces, institutions, business negotiations and conflicts of any nature. My pet projects are introducing NVC to children through a musical play touring schools and an animated movie.

■ Dorset is giving monthly NVC workshops in Tyagarah. From these, three NVC practice groups are now running in the Byron area. The next workshop is on March 15-16. Phone 6684 7135 for more information.

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Remember voting is compulsory and you must post your ballot papers before Election Day on March 22.

For more information call 1300 135 736 between 9am to 7pm Monday to Friday, visit www.seo.nsw.gov.au

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Election Day Saturday March 22