

Rocking The Boat Without Drowning Everybody: Redefining Marriage and Family Life

One of the key relational principles of Nonviolent Communication is an invitation to hold everyone's needs with equal care, not just care for my needs at the expense of others, nor just care for someone else's needs at a cost for myself. In my journey as a spouse, a mother, a daughter and a human being, I have come to rely on that intention as a sailor relies on the North Star. Stormy weather does lead me to places of sea-sickening, discombobulating confusion and even utter darkness. Yet, trusting in the brightness of the North Star, and passionately holding on to this core value of how I want to live my life, consistently brings me back on track, and leads me to ever new horizons.

I met Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg Ph.D., founder and director of "The Center for Nonviolent Communication" (www.cnvc.org in 2002). Since then, I have intensively focused on how this value of holding everyone's needs with equal care informs and transforms my relationship with my children: living a paradigm of partnership in the complexities of caring for tiny human beings, who enter the world completely dependent. Some of the questions I have entertained are: How do I hold with equal care the multiple and seemingly conflicting needs of my teenager and my 6 year old? How do I support three kids in living freely and authentically while holding their siblings' needs? And how do I put myself in the mix? What could holding my needs with balance look like, especially when having young children with primary and immediate needs? After all, parental needs are less pressing than the urgent needs of a young child. And as parents we all have/have had unmet needs around sleep, self-care, freedom, etc. It seems that parenting, especially during the first few years, is more of a temporary self-transcendence journey than a practice of holding everyone's needs with equal care. What about if parents are blessed with a child with special needs, a child who may require their attention for the rest of their lives? Does parenting in the long run hold any hope for mutuality, the aspiration of love? My kids now are 15, 11 and 7, and my divided heart still closely knows the experience of being torn and pulled in different directions. Can it find peace?

I am soberly aware that I am over-programmed to endlessly give. And I am also aware that self-denial ultimately feeds stories of victimhood and hopelessness. And that children do not thrive with a relentlessly self-sacrificing parental figure. So, how do I practice unconditional love (i.e. there is nothing my kids can do to earn my love, nor is there anything that they can do to lose it)? Does "true" love preclude self-love?

Long ago, I did encounter the concept of being responsible for meeting my needs. Yet, in hindsight, I realize I have danced the dance of self-denial and self-preservation long enough: staying up late to study, journal or write an article, so that it would not take time away from the kids....and it would not trigger the familiar guilt trip I experience when taking time away from my family. I have experienced a loss of the *joie de vivre* because I have unendingly put my needs last, or -even more self-depleting, believed that I should not even have needs of my own.

How can I support myself in maintaining this balancing awareness of holding everyone's needs equally when "being a mother" is somehow tied with self-limiting beliefs (the "Can't do that – I have kids!" story line)?

A New Season of Life

I had a pretty strong sense that both my husband and I have founded our marital relationship on partnership and mutuality. I did not expect, almost 18 years later, to look at the North Star and ask my partner to redefine our marriage by taking a fearless assessment of our relationship, while fully resting in our steadfast dedication to each other. I trust that equal mattering is a mutual intention of how we want to be in relationship with each other. It is rather a matter of realizing that some of the arrangements that worked for us so far are not working anymore. Causes and conditions have changed; I am not the same person I was a few years ago, the kids are older, more capable and responsible, etc. So, my interests, aspirations and pursuits have changed. I am reorienting myself, and consequently, since I am part of this family system, my family is reorienting, too. Holding everyone's needs with equal care is a dynamic unfolding of an ever new reality. Its manifestation changes according to the circumstances and life stages. Mutuality, partnership and justice within the family take on new meanings, and my family, as a living organism, experiences new waves of life energy wanting to emerge.

While I was raised with the principle of "Love thy neighbor as yourself" (an expression of interdependence and equal mattering,) I am still learning what that truly means. Part of the journey has been coming to the realization that gender-based stereotypes and internalized templates have unconsciously informed many of the choices I have made as a wife and as a mother. I carry deep-seated beliefs about feminine identity, marriage, motherhood and family life that are not easily shifted. Why is it that I feel so "fulfilled" when I bake those cookies for the kids? Is it the sheer joy of contribution or am I appeasing an inner voice that is telling me to embody the "perfect" mother role? And why do I keep chauffeuring the kids to their activities limiting my own? Even when I now realize many of these choices may have and may still come from an unconscious sense of obligation, duty and consequent inner demand, I still want to hold myself with self-compassion around it: I have done and keep doing the best I can, given the internal and external resources, level of awareness, self-understanding, skills and information I have available moment by moment. All along, I have tried and try to respond to needs the best way I know how.

For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under the sun. A new season has begun for me and for my most intimate relationships. I have been awakened to a new understanding of what "holding everyone's needs with equal care" may mean, and I am learning to manifest that in this season of my life. I have come to realize not only how much our preferred strategies are informed by our world-view, but how much the intensity of some needs and the choice of connecting with one particular value over another is influenced by our core beliefs and our unconscious conditioning. In my case, the gender polarization links my self-worth to giving of myself without ensuring my giving comes from abundance (self-fullness) rather than scarcity (self-less-ness); from fear (of being a bad wife and mother) rather than love

(connecting with the pure joy of giving from the heart.) That ultimately points to the distinction between "servitude" and "service," the former being a loss of self, and the latter actually manifesting from a sense of inner identity and strength.

How do I hold on to my needs without being it at a cost for my family? How do I hold their needs with loving care without falling back into my default system of putting my needs on the back burner? How can I support myself and ask for support, when I feel "compelled" from the inside to give in and give up on my dreams, desires and time (self-denial)? One strategy my family came up with is to ask me to take a moment and check in with myself again when they hear me say an immediate "yes" to a request of theirs.

I am boldly committed to tapping more deeply into my authenticity, while aware that I am a woman caught between paradigms: having grown up in old paradigm of sacrifice (the traditional male/female; bread-winner/homemaker; provider/nurturer; public/private model of marriage), while seeking to live in a new paradigm of partnership and equal mattering.

It is a time for discernment: to learn to heed the voice inside myself beyond the conditionings that inform my default system. It is a time to learn to love while decoupling love from "de-selfing."

After all love also entails a balancing awareness of boundaries between self (fundamental stability) and others (openness to input.) And it is from that self-awareness that unity and communion can be truly embraced. Yet, for a woman this may not be as clear-cut as it sounds. For instance, during pregnancy my body was holding someone else's tiny body: I and my child co-existed. During the lactating years my kids were often an "extension" of my body: the boundaries between me and my child were blurred.

Aware of these complexities, I want to shed a beam of light on the roles and images assigned to me by society and on the choices I make as to maximize my ability to stay in integrity with my sense of courage, authenticity, justice and freedom beyond societal conditionings. I am ready to re-envision the understanding I had of myself. I may not be able to have it all, all at once –as this fast-paced, quick-fix society wants me to believe. But I am learning to deeply care for who I am and for the song that wants to be sung in and through me. I am committed to living the life my vibrant authenticity wants me to live rather than the life I have been conditioned to live. And, thanks to the North Star I embarked in this adventure while staying fully committed to my family's wellbeing.

I am starting to envision what equal mattering in a gender-biased society may look like. I am reclaiming myself, my autonomy, creativity, and self-responsibility without giving up on my family.

Learning How

For years movies have tackled this issue: *Kramer vs. Kramer* in the '70 or the recent *Eat, Pray, Love* propose the strategy of leaving one's family to find oneself. It seems society is wanting women to believe that the quest for identity and purpose is an individual path which

cannot be upheld while also upholding the needs of those around us. Yet, becoming a mother is a very defining experience in life: we do not need to sacrifice that on the altar of self-actualization.

Responsiveness to others does not preclude responsiveness to self. And the recognition of my needs is actually a pre-requisite to fully recognize and embrace the needs of the people I love.

How can I be a supportive partner and nurturing mother (values I treasure) without losing myself in relationships? How to embrace support and nurturance while upholding self-mattering, self-awareness and self-care? *Giving* of oneself actually entail *having* a self. And having a self entails loving self-regard.

So, how do I empower myself to intentionally make congruent choices that are sustainable (life-giving v/s life-alienating) for all involved? How do I redirect myself when in the midst of this centrifuge force which propels me to over-extend myself to the point of losing my center? How do I stay connected to my humanity, experienced in the deep joy of contributing to others as an act of self-empowerment (rather than a self-depleting default response)? Does my contributing actually empowers the recipient of my action?

Thanks to the shift in consciousness and skills I have learned in NVC, the idea of speaking up and standing firm does not stimulate fear of conflict in me anymore. I trust that I can receive empathically whatever arises in my partner and children while expressing clearly and compassionately what I need.

Dr. Rosenberg talks about being in this place of mutuality where it is hard to establish who is the giver and who is the receiver. This points to a giving that is replenishing the giver: a new dimension of the abundance of interdependence. Sacrifice is then reframed as clarity of intention underlying the choices I make on a daily basis. "Sacrificial love" comes with a cost for everyone involved, not just for the one sacrificing oneself for the sake of others.

When making choices, I want to remind myself that the joy of contributing may also take the form of contributing to myself. I want to awaken to the reality that rather than giving in and giving up I can choose to give to myself and others. My giving is then connected to awareness of needs with a commitment to promote life in me and others. When I observe myself choosing contribution over other needs alive in the moment, I double-check: "Is my giving self-empowering and empowering others? Or is it depleting me and disempowering others?"

Without an alternative paradigm, conventional marriage roles, patriarchal images of motherhood, femininity and societal beliefs encourage me to hold my needs secondary to my husband's and children's. On the other hand, I do not want to buy into the other extreme of the *continuum* and believe that staying at home with my children and being committed to their wellbeing is an intellectual waste, that I am squandering my abilities by "only" being a mother/wife, as if there were no inherent value in caring for another human being and the sole meaningful purpose in life comes from "self-actualizing" work. Deborah Shaw Lewis and

Charmaine Crouse Yoest in *Mother in the Middle* sharply challenge the belief that: "Self-actualization is the goal; work is the game; children are an impediment."

I am holding on to the vision and mission, the sense of meaning and purpose that motherhood grants me. I want to stay fully connected to the primary role I have in my children's lives. And I also want to keep envisioning and manifesting a balanced life where my needs may find a channel for expression through meaningful work beyond the family. The North Star is supporting me in staying rooted in an awareness of letting the life force (what in NVC we call "needs") freely and fully flow through me and others. The Star is leading me to explore new territories, landscapes of renewed awareness, wellbeing, authenticity, and thriving, interdependence, balance, respect, mutual mattering, cooperation, shared caring and loving. New identities for me and those I love.

A constant reassessment of needs and consequent change may be scary, and they can also offer unprecedented opportunities for healing, growth and the emergence of a new and more authentic self.

Being a wife and a mother can be the path for self-development and spiritual quest rather than a tragic spiraling of de-selfing. Family life can become the path to learn how to love myself the way I love my husband and children. And, paradoxically, by learning to love myself I can love my kids and husband more abundantly. Staying connected to my self-mattering furthers my ability to hold and -whenever possible, to respond to my children's needs with loving care.

This dynamic principle is inviting me to an ever deepening understanding: my children's needs are no less important than mine, just because they are packaged in small bodies.

My needs are no less important than my husband's needs, even if my social conditioning would influence me to believe that. Understanding my gender-biased worldview and consequent operational default system (which becomes especially powerful when my brain is in a place of distress) help me take care of myself in new and radical ways. Making my unconscious programming conscious helps me heal and reclaim my deepest authenticity.

This is a life-long journey of balancing authenticity and relationships. I learn about life along with my children. My children learn about life, relationships and values from the choices my husband and I make: they learn to hold themselves with care by us holding their needs with loving-kindness and by witnessing how we hold ourselves in the process.

Ultimately the North Star of holding everyone's needs as equally important may serve more than one sailor.

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