

## Non Violent Communication

Something happens when we speak each other's languages. We experience the limits of our own words and perspectives. We learn curiosity.

The Pentecost story is compelling because it's a story for our time—a diverse group of people speaking and able to understand one another. Today we live in a world where words are becoming more toxic, where language is used to divide and destroy, seen today particularly in the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump. He is making history by his willingness to lower the bar and set aside civil political discourse in favor of visceral name calling. Pentecost tells another story.

It's no small thing that the Holy Spirit loosened tongues to break down barriers on Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. In the face of differences, God compelled his people to engage. From day one, the call was to press in, linger, listen, speak, and enter into conversation.

We forget what words can do. They are hard objects and have weight. They aren't just sound traveling through the air, or symbols on a computer screen. They have power. They move from one human being to another and change us. Words generate emotions. They sow thoughts and propel us to action. Violence is often preceded by violent words. But violence is not limited to the physical realm. Words that cause a disconnect between people, categorizing them with nasty labels, is a form of violence aimed at marginalize them. In the process rational thought and conversation are diminished. The greatest atrocities in human history began as words.

How often does our language become violent? Brief encounters with strangers on the internet or in a public space can sometimes be the most dangerous, because it is so easy to forget we are interacting with another human being who has emotions and needs just like ourselves.

It's like being in a car. Driving by yourself, you have complete freedom. You are in control of where you go. It's that feeling of freedom and control that makes it so exhilarating to first get your license. It's easy to forget that driving is a completely interdependent system. When you get behind the wheel of your car, your life and safety are dependent on the decisions and actions of all the drivers and pedestrians around you. Likewise, their life and safety are dependent on your decisions and actions.

An amazing thing is happening in some European cities where they are paying close attention to the interconnectivity between drivers and pedestrians in order to address issues of traffic safety. In some busy intersections full of pedestrians and vehicles, city leaders have removed all traffic lights, all traffic signs, all painted lines on the road, even the curbs are gone.

This concept reinvents the relationship between drivers and pedestrians. It's called "shared space." It originated in the Netherlands and has been implemented in a number of European cities since the 90's. Poynton is a city in England with one of the busiest intersections with thousands of

vehicles passing through every day. Traffic jams were a huge problem, so they removed all traffic lights and signs.

The idea is counterintuitive. Some think its crazy. A German magazine, describing the shared space concept, said: “It may sound like chaos, but it’s not. Drivers will force the accelerator down ruthlessly only in situations where everything has been fully regulated. Where the situation is unclear, they’re forced to drive more carefully and cautiously.”

Its about redirecting people’s attention away from rules and toward each other.

The new shared space keeps traffic flowing, reduces accidents, and increases foot traffic. The space changes the way people interact. As one traffic engineer describes: it forces people to rely on each other to negotiate their movement through the space.

One local resident said: “It has a very calming effect, and I think we are all being kinder to each other.” Where once you saw division and separation, vehicles and pedestrians are now integrated into a common area where each moves more slowly around each other — almost in a type of dance. Watching the shared space at work amazing. Instead of delays and honking horns, you see a quiet, constant flow. Instead of competition for scarce road space, you see cooperation. (You can view it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vzDDMzq7d0> ).

What if we rethought our interface, not just between drivers and pedestrians, but overall, between each other as human beings? What if we brought this shared space concept to our daily conversations? The designers behind shared space suggest that when driving we have learned to pay attention to the wrong things. Maybe when we interact with each other we have also learned to look at the wrong things. Instead of traffic signals, we’ve learned to look at each other’s opinions. Instead of road signs, we’ve learned to look at the labels and judgments we give ourselves and others.

In the non-violent communication model (a course authored by Marshall Rosenberg) this deeper shared space begins with the land of emotions. By paying attention to our empathy and compassion, we see more of humanity than labels and opinions. We begin to see our common needs rather than fragmented individuals. Rosenberg says: “We come closer to the truth when we connect with what’s alive in people than when we just listen to what they think.”

So the question is, where do we focus our attention as we navigate the world? On opinions and labels that make us angry and hateful? Or on our common humanity, empathy and compassion?

Pentecost calls us to conversation and understanding, not polarization. It demands new skills that we may have set aside in order to win the argument.

~ PB