

Reflections of a Troubled Black Man

A Teacher's Quest, Turning Fear Into Strength, and Pain Into Passion

A Memoir

by

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Chapter 3

Decolonizing My Experience: From Individual to Holistic Education

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”

Lao Tzu

I sluggishly arrived at the airport at 6:45 a.m. I moved through the security checkpoints and walked to my terminal. I looked up and saw Patty, an Art teacher at the school where I worked. Patty said, “Hey, Morris, are you excited about this NVC retreat? I can hardly wait! We will meet Kathy at the retreat because she is on a different flight.” Kathy is the conflict mediation specialist who introduced me to the NVC stuff. I wasn’t feeling it, or maybe denial ruled my spirit. After the incident with Leon, I knew something about me needed to change.

Our first flight to Phoenix, Arizona, lasted three hours. I had the window seat, which enabled me to look at the clouds. I enjoyed looking at all the geographic wonders of the Southwest. Before boarding our connecting flight to Seattle, Washington, I became sick. My stomach started jumping and twisting like acrobats at the Universal Soul Circus. I felt nauseous. Fortunately, our flight to Seattle went quickly. I became enamored with the gigantic Mt. Rainier as we flew directly over it to land. We were finally in Seattle and decided to grab some fish and chips at the airport before heading to Harmony Hill Retreat Center, where our training would occur.

As we exited the airport and headed to a shuttle bus, oddly, a random guy gave me some books. We boarded a shuttle bus. It took us to the ferry that would take us across Puget Sound to our destination. My headache, frustration, and irritation prevented me from enjoying my first visit to

Seattle and the Pacific Northwest. We arrived at the retreat center after hours of air and land travel. Finally, I was able to walk into a nice cozy room. I plopped onto my comfortable bed. But only for a short time. I heard a knock on my door, got up, and opened it. A woman's delightful voice greeted me, saying, "Hey Morris, glad you made it. Now it's time to go to a meeting!" It was Kathy. I grimaced and buried my head in the pillow. With a weak and exasperated voice, I uttered, "Thanks, Kathy."

The Puget Sound formed the perfect backdrop, watching over our time at Harmony Hill. It is a gorgeous body of water that drew me closer each time I stared at it. The mountains that made a fortress around the retreat center were sturdy, silent, and strong. These inanimate structures couldn't say anything, but I could feel their magnanimous presence. We gathered outside in 87-degree weather and made a circle. The weather was unseasonably warm and sunny for that time of the year. After we briefly introduced ourselves, we walked inside to eat dinner. The spread of food was healthy and a bit tasty. I gazed at the potatoes, lasagna, salad, and ice-cold water. We finished our meal and returned outside to play games and engage in icebreakers. The group seemed fun, open, and free-spirited.

Most attendees were older White women, a few White males, and no Black women. I was the only Black male. We began by setting up agreements for safety and trust. As we sat together in a circle, we each had an opportunity to share why we chose to attend the nine-day Teach NVC For Life Retreat. With trepidation, I said, "I want to learn all I can about NVC, take some tools and strategies back to my classroom, and continue to grow and evolve through this work." Everyone shared their motives for coming. Some people got emotional and started crying. I realized the

power of folks gathering in a circle. At the end of each long day, some of us continued to laugh and hang out. As a part of my daily ritual, I joined in before going to bed.

The next day, we learned how to put our visions in perspective with the tensions and current reality surrounding them. I was frustrated with this exercise because my vision wasn't crystal clear, and I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of the group. Next, we participated in an inner/outer grief circle. I thought, "Man! What is it with these circles of tears!" I watched people share much pain, heaviness, and grief about their professional struggles. I started by stating, "As you all can see, I'm the only young Black male here." I reluctantly shared my struggles as a misunderstood young Black male teacher. It was refreshing to feel victorious after I shared my pain. It was cool that the circle created empathy and a space where people could sit and live in what they were dealing with.

One of the attendees was a woman named Cat Cadden, who has an NVC school called Temba. I believe she is an NVC rock star trainer. She spoke with boldness, passion, and power. Every time she shared, I sat up because I knew she was about to drop some gems. She talked freely about her past and didn't hide anything. Everything about her being is the real deal. "I want to be like her!" I said. Cat shared about people's constant need for belonging and community. She said, "When I did drugs and partied all the time, I was meeting my need for community and belonging." This statement revolutionized my perspective on NVC. It resonated deeply within me. She is challenging, changing, and shaping lives with her work. She understands human connection and youth development on a profoundly spiritual level. I wanted to learn as much as I could from her.

Everyone at the retreat learned about my sugar craze and thought it was hilarious. I love junk food. I like chips, candy, and chocolate chip cookies! None of my favorite foods were on the reservation. I desperately needed sugar, and we were miles away from civilization, I thought, trying to get to the mainland.

I missed my family and needed a break from the gushy, gooey, cultish atmosphere. On Wednesday, I planned to take the ferry, see downtown Seattle, and return to the reservation later that evening. Suddenly, I had another thought. With an assertive, direct voice, I said, Bro, you are here at this nonviolent communication retreat to stop acting so violently, so take this opportunity to work on it. I shrugged my shoulders as if I was right—or at least my thinking brain was right. I finished the intense escape plan and returned to the workshop.

During this exercise, stations were set up based on the four components of nonviolent communication: observation, feelings, needs, and requests. It was cool to realize other ways to communicate beyond how society conditioned us. In our daily language, I learned that we had more words for labels and judgments of people than we had for expressing what's alive for us in each moment. We are conditioned to communicate from our heads, not our hearts. This conditioning leads us to believe this is a standard communication method. However, we confuse what is habitual with what is natural. The natural way to communicate takes real inner work to connect with people.

After the last exercise of the day, I walked to my room only to have a rush of more epiphanies. This retreat was a chance to cleanse my spirit and have an excellent opportunity for personal

renewal. I had suppressed things in my life. I needed to work on my marriage, parenting style, teaching skills, and myself. My anger was not the master. The messenger was sent to help identify my deeper needs and values. I wanted to slow life down and return to Cleveland with a renewed mindset. I struggled with this new process of communication. I, however, wanted to stay with it because something inside of me was being tapped and activated. I was ready to take NVC back to the harsh realities of a school and empower students, parents, and administrators to change.

The following day, I rose at 6:30 a.m. to hike with a cool guy named Eric from Nelson, Canada. He loves Billy Idol, the Denver Broncos, and pop culture. The scenery on our hike was breathtaking, but the pace was grueling. As we ran, I felt the burn in my lungs as I struggled through hills and woods, trying to keep up with Eric. We finally reached the top of a gorgeous hilltop overlooking Harmony Hill. I stood with my hands on my hips, feeling the sweat drip down my face. I took deep breaths, and my chest felt like it would explode. I looked around and saw my hiking partner meditating on the ground. I watched him as he sat in a lotus position without a care in the world. I decided to try it. It didn't work because I had no idea what I was doing. As soon as I sat down, he quickly stood and dashed down the hill. I said, "Oh hell no, I ain't making it down this hill." But I did.

Standing in the shower, I reflected on the new retreat and new world into which I had been initiated. It was weird. However, the freedom for self-expression, radical self-care, and emotional safety nurtured my tormented soul. I was there for a reason. Pain pushes you, and purpose pulls you. My defenses were slowly melting away like butter in a skillet. Each day, I

found myself letting my guard down and enjoying the freshness of the retreat. As I continued to reflect on my thoughts, they took a detour into the future. I asked myself, “Will I be able to take this feeling back to my world? Will this work control the angry monster that comes out of me? Will I be able to change?”

The following session explored gratitude. I brainstormed with my partner about things I was grateful for. It was remarkable how the facilitators challenged us to think deeply and profoundly about the people, places, events, and life experiences for which we were grateful. In the circle, we learned how to express appreciation and gratitude using the four-step process of Nonviolent Communication. The four steps are observation, feelings, needs, and a specific request.

I decided to share the appreciation I had for my wife. She was home for nine days with my seven-year-old daughter and five-year-old son. I looked at my journal, read my scribbled notes, and said, “When you spend nine days taking care of the kids without me, I feel appreciative, thankful, and happy that you have met my need for support, respect, and consideration. Would you let me take you out to dinner when I return? Also, would you mind if I participated in more retreats and continued to work on myself?” My partner responded as if she were my wife. She replied, “I would hold off on that second request for a while!” This process was like learning how to ride a bike. It felt like I needed training wheels, to speak. It seemed robotic, exhausting, and cumbersome. However, it challenged me to speak and listen from an authentic place and listen with my heart.

When the session ended, we all decided to swim in Puget Sound. I am not much of a swimmer, but I love socializing and having a good time. We all walked down a narrow path through the woods and down a slope until it opened to a beautiful body of water. All the folks dropped their towels and started running directly into the water. I walked as slowly as a snail and placed my foot slightly into this frigid cold water. I uttered, “This water is freezing!” It wasn’t, but I am a bit dramatic. I watched from afar as everyone swam in the frigid Puget Sound.

Later that evening, some of us gathered for a jam session in the living room area. One guy pulled out this incredibly long musical instrument. It looked strange because I had never seen anything quite like it. He blew into it, and a deep sound came through a hollow tunnel. Everyone sat and listened intently as if he was a human snake charmer. I sheepishly asked a woman, “What’s the name of that instrument?” She responded, “A didgeridoo. Indigenous Australians developed it in northern Australia within the last 1,500 years, and now people play it worldwide.” He continued to play his instrument, and it sounded like a swarm of bees was buzzing and flying inside. The evening took another remarkable turn when Eric started playing music on his acoustic guitar. We all held hands and sang songs I had never heard of in my entire life. We danced and moved our bodies, reciting folk songs late into the night.

I did something I always wanted to do on the last night after our daily session. Eric pulled out his guitar and started to play. Another guy began to make the best tribal sounds on a Djembe drum while the didgeridoo undergirded the trio of talented musicians. I gazed around at everyone as we danced and chanted in the circle. My smile was as wide as the Grand Canyon. However, I felt nervous. I uttered some words and attempted to rhyme and flow with the sounds created by the

trio. No one could hear what I was mumbling. So, I slowly let the tension leave my body and allowed my words to flow. I got louder and more confident with each rhyme I constructed in that blissful moment. Now, all eyes were on me, and the music continued to support my impromptu freestyle rapping skills. In addition to my freestyle rap, we all started singing, “There are no bad people, just people who feel bad. No bad people, just people who feel bad!” I thought to myself, never in a million years would I sing folk songs with White people in a place called Harmony Hill! My Black inner hippie was fully activated!

Soon after the party calmed down, Grant, another NVC participant, said, “Hey, Mo. Do you want to go outside and watch the stars?” My face tightened up, and a rush of thoughts flooded my amygdala. I thought, man, I ain’t star gazing with a guy. However, Grant saw this world in a way that opened to possibilities, not closed them. Unlike other men, he moved through the world boldly, outside of this man box that protected us and simultaneously destroyed our ability to feel. Grant moved freely through society like a gypsy, exploring, expressing, learning, and growing. I secretly admired him. He is a hybrid between Mr. Rogers, James Dean, and Jim Carrey. Grant is the embodiment of what it means to be free. In his bold request to watch stars with me, he permitted me to step outside my man box for good. I courageously strolled behind him outside. There was not a cloud in the clear night sky. Stars shined like gold-clad earrings hanging from the night sky just out of our reach. We stayed silent as we looked up at the collection of stars that spoke to the wonders of our souls—time stood still as we gazed at the stars together.

The final day arrived. We finished our last session and walked into the dining hall to eat lunch for the last time together. I suddenly jumped up from the table and stared intently at a woman

who wheeled in a cart of cookies. I shouted, “Yes, cookies!” It was my first time spending nine days without eating sugar. Everyone in the dining hall began clapping like the feel-good 80s movie, *The Bad News Bears*. I took a bite of the gooey cookie. It was slightly different from the cookies I liked, but I was happy to have it.

After lunch, we talked about how we would spend the rest of our summer. I was thrilled about the new school year. I had new tools, a renewed spirit, and a new and fresh, innovative framework to work from. Before anyone shared, a woman named Carrie turned to me. She said, “Morris, we spent a lot of time thinking about this, and we want to know if you would be interested in us filming you teaching your kids the art of nonviolent communication in Cleveland.” My mind went blank. The room was spinning. I felt flustered, nervous, and rattled. I wanted to get up from the table and leave, never to return. I uttered, “Me, nah. That would be hard to do. I am new at this, and you want me to teach this for a film?” “Exactly,” Carrie said. “This is a process that you love, you’re authentic, you care, and those kids would benefit from learning and practicing NVC in their lives,” she tried to convince me. I looked around the table at everyone staring at me. I paused. I thought quickly, feeling pressured, knowing that saying yes would mean taking a deep-sea dive into uncharted waters. Then Gary, another cool guy who produced documentaries, said, “Yes, Morris. It would be a great opportunity to showcase your talents and expose the kids to this great communication process. Cat and I will be there to support and assist.” I paused to think. I definitely would love to learn and watch Cat teach my students NVC. I gulped and said, “Yes,” before the flood of negative thoughts drowned me in self-doubt.

When I returned to my room, I sat on the bed and reflected on the last nine days at Harmony Hill Teach For Life NVC Retreat. I felt a swirl of emotions as I thought about the friendships and lifelong bonds, I had created in such a short time. I knew the social intimacy and deep vulnerability I and others shared as a group would profoundly impact my legacy as a man and educator. I let my guard down each day and resisted the urge to play it safe or cool. Each day, I did not allow the difference between my youth and color to hinder the pure joy, wisdom, healing, and forgiveness that Harmony Hill Teach For Life provided me. I am genuinely thankful for being seen by a new community of compassionate human beings. We were all struggling to find our way in a fast-paced world where we all needed to step back and notice how we felt and what we needed.

Still deep in thought, I realized it was time to say farewell. I immediately felt my tear ducts open, and my eyes became moisturized. My head felt as if it were as heavy as a cinder block. It forced me to look downward while walking out of my cabin for the last time. “Suck it up. Hold it in! You bet’ not break down and cry!” I said to myself. I took one more step and saw Grant, my stargazing Mr. Rogers, James Dean, and Jim Carry friend, heading straight to me. I scrambled to think of something to say. However, speechless, I was engulfed in tears as Grant held me in his arms. It was my first time experiencing the power and presence of empathy without saying a single word. We released our brotherly hug, and I continued down the stairs with saggy red eyes, hugging everyone for the last time.

I climbed into the shuttle with four other folks. We engaged in more profound and intimate conversations while heading to the ferry. When we arrived in downtown Seattle, I walked with

Gigi, one of the participants, and helped her find her hotel. As we walked, she chose to share with me the pain of being in a verbally abusive marriage for over thirty years. We walked, and she talked. As we strolled up and down sidewalks, passing museums, fancy shops, and restaurants, my heart, mind, and spirit were intertwined with her.

At the beginning of our conversation, she seemed meek, hesitant, and reluctant. Now, she was fully expressive in sharing her story. I realized she had decided to let go. She realized she was no longer responsible for the years of oppression that made her feel worthless and invisible. I said, “What are you feeling and needing?” She triumphantly stated, “I feel relieved and scared because I need to be free. I want my life back! I’m tired of being mistreated,” she asserted. “He holds me hostage because of his wealth. I need independence and a way to care for myself like I did before I married him,” she said. We reached her destination. We embraced. She said, “Thank you, Morris.”

I skipped away, looking for the first corner store to treat myself to junk food! It was a monumental trip indeed. I basked at the moment before I made the long trek from the Pacific Northwest back to Cleveland, Ohio. In a matter of nine days, I experienced a radical change. Will my change, however, be enough to teach and transform the hearts and minds of students and a system that is going through change itself?