

# Working With Grief In Prison

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In this article, I describe a real life instance of using the process of Mourning, as taught by Nonviolent Communication (NVC), to support an incarcerated individual with their grief.

I was facilitating a circle of six men in a Northern California prison on a Monday afternoon. This was the tenth meeting of our yearlong healing and accountability class. Our group comprised 33 incarcerated students and five facilitators, of whom three were incarcerated. Most of the students had life sentences with an average of 20 years of incarceration. Each meeting was two hours long with a mix of teaching and personal sharing. This Monday, the students were reading a letter from their heart to someone who had died. There were five groups of six to seven students each spread around the long, rectangular room. In each group, a facilitator was inviting students to take turns reading and connecting with their grief. There is a lot of unprocessed grief in prisons; incarcerated people suffer significant losses including missing birthdays, funerals, graduations, the loss of dreams, opportunities, health, connection with loved ones, dignity, safety, agency, identity, possessions, and even the loss of life. Groups like ours offer students, who want to heal and transform, a safe space where they can be vulnerable. Few of our students had experienced therapy, meditation, and other healing modalities before they came to prison.

In my group, Joe (not his actual name), a 6-foot tall white man who I judged to be in his late 60s with tattoos all over his neck and arms, offered to read his letter first. Joe looked 10 years older than he was due to a rough life. A tattoo that looked like a white power symbol on his arm caught my eye as Joe started to read. As a person of color and an immigrant who had encountered xenophobia, I felt uneasy and unsure about holding space for him. Joe was quiet and respectful in his demeanor; the black men in my group appeared to be relaxed around him. At that moment, I chose to believe the tattoo was a relic of his past. As a practitioner of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), I knew that I had an “enemy image” of Joe. According to NVC, we hold enemy images when we disconnect from an individual or group’s humanity and see them as the “other” in some way. In NVC, we shift out of othering by finding our common humanity. This is one of the reasons I love NVC.

As Joe started to read his letter to his mother, I did my best to give him my undivided attention—to “feel with him”—despite my lingering low-level unease with my thoughts about his tattoo. In order to feel with someone, I find it helpful to shift from focusing only on their words to also sensing the vibratory quality or emotional tone of delivery through the tone of voice, intonation, quality of breathing, pauses, eye movement, facial expressions, posture, and gestures. I find that this is similar to broadening my attention from just the visuals in a beautiful space, like a grove of redwood trees, a cathedral, a zen temple, a garden, etc. to also include their particular vibratory feel. I was also paying attention to the emotional tone of the men who were listening.

In his two-page letter, Joe spoke to his mother, acknowledging the ways he had let her down. His mother never gave up on him despite the different kinds of trouble he got into that eventually landed him in prison. I also heard Joe’s regret and pain for her heartbreak when he was sent to prison. The deep sadness, tenderness, and regret in Joe’s voice spread through our small

group. I could feel and see the heaviness in the shoulders of the men who were listening, some of whom hunched forward. A thick, heavy silence settled on us. It felt like the group was holding their breath. After getting Joe's permission to interrupt, I asked the group if they could feel a deep sadness and heaviness as they heard Joe's letter. There were slow, silent barely perceptible nods with downcast eyes. We were feeling the sadness together. Joe's sadness created a space wherein each man was touching into his own pool of unshed tears.

In order to resource our nervous systems, I asked the group if they would be willing to take a few deep breaths with me. There were slow nods. I led the group in a few, slow deep inhales and exhales. While we were breathing, I also asked the men to gently push their feet into the ground and relax their legs a few times. I find this connection with the body and ground to be helpful when feeling intense emotions. In addition to regulating the group, I was slowing us all down to be with the sadness and tenderness that Joe's sharing had brought into our group space.

Once I felt the group was breathing again, I asked Joe to continue reading. As Joe read, I felt his mother's unconditional love and positive regard for Joe. I imagined she may have been the greatest source of love in his life, the one person who never saw him as a monster. In that moment of feeling his mother's love, my enemy image of Joe as a white supremacist dissolved. My fear dissolved and was replaced by warmth and care for Joe. He was no longer the "other" to me. He was just like me in this space of our precious, common humanity. This was the emergence of emotional empathy. I felt Joe relax and soften as I reflected my impression of his mother's unconditional love. Emotional empathy is an act of communion since we have a shared experience of feelings and thoughts. The sadness and regret were more bearable in this place of human connection. bell hooks says it beautifully: "rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion"<sup>1</sup>.

There was something pure about Joe's sadness and regret. I did not sense significant shame, anger, self-criticism, agitation, judgment, etc. It felt like his feelings were coming from his heart. In NVC, mourning is an organic healing process that emerges when we connect our sadness with the preciousness of what was lost. In NVC lingo, the term "need" represents what's precious or important to us. It felt like Joe's heart was mourning the loss of his connection with his mother where he experienced unconditional love. I asked Joe and the group if they were feeling a quality of love, however subtly, in addition to grief and regret. When they nodded, I led us in a few collective guided breaths to slow us down and make space to feel the love together.

When I checked in with Joe after the breaths, he was connected to the love from which his sadness was emerging. The love did not make the sadness go away. Instead, it changed the quality of sadness, giving it a bittersweet flavor. The pain of loss was tempered by something precious and important to Joe's heart. I could feel a sense of movement as the sadness was being integrated by the connection with love. When Joe confirmed this for me, I knew that the NVC process of mourning was underway. At this stage, there is nothing to do other than to stay present and experience the healing happening in one's body. As I thanked Joe for his courage to be so vulnerable, there were gentle nods and appreciative glances towards him from the other men. I asked Joe to stay present with his internal process as we transitioned away from him. The rest of the group appeared to be integrating the process since they were sitting more upright and making eye contact with me as I spoke.

When we open to the loss of something or someone dear to us, we can feel submerged and lost in an endless ocean of grief, despair, sadness, heaviness, etc. with no way out. NVC's mourning

process asks us to connect with the preciousness of what was lost i.e. our needs. It is like diving for precious pearls within the ocean of grief to unlock an alchemical process of healing.

References:

1. All About Love, bell hooks

Resources:

1. To learn NVC, refer to Marshall Rosenberg's book: [NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION: A LANGUAGE OF LIFE](#).
2. For online courses: <https://nvcacademy.com/>
3. For NVC coaching: [myempathycoach@gmail.com](mailto:myempathycoach@gmail.com)