PODCAST TRANSCRIPT
S6E12: A PERSONAL JOURNEY WITH NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION WITH PAUL QUINN

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Paul Quinn: I went to this nonviolent communication training, the very first one I ever went to and got, mid-morning, the leader said, not specifically to me, but I think it was to me, the acronym, W.A.I.T, which is, Why Am I Talking? And so, it, it, it started me saying, if I'm talking, I'm actually not hearing you because I'm talking. And so, in different settings now, I say to myself all the time, wait, Paul, wait and listen. Because what happens is, I don't allow people that might not find it as easy to take the floor, and I, I want to hear what they say now 'cause I missed it because I was so busy doing the talking.

Sam Fuqua: That's Paul Quinn, and this is, Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Alexis Miles. Hi Alexis.

Alexis Miles: Hi Sam.

Sam Fuqua: We're so pleased to be joined for this episode of Well, That Went Sideways! by Paul Quinn. Hello. Welcome.

Paul Quinn: Hello. Hi Alexis. Hi Sam.

Sam Fuqua: Great to have you with us, Paul. You've mentioned that you are learning nonviolent communication and you've been working with incarcerated men. Uh, I wanted to ask you about that work, but first of all, how did you come to nonviolent communication, and what are you learning?

Paul Quinn: I found that nonviolence was something that was interesting me more and more, you know. I read a lot, you know, Martin Luther King, John Lewis, there's just, Gandhi. There's people that kept, you know, finding a way to make nonviolence a part of their lives. And so I said, I've gotta learn more about this and I can't get it all from a book. So, I went to a local training in the Seattle area, and it really started me on this journey of how to, to be nonviolent, not just how to read about nonviolence. And, it's a practice, it takes time, and it's taken me a lot of effort, and it's been so worthwhile.

Sam Fuqua: So, where does it start? I mean, someone would say, well, what's nonviolent communication?

Paul Quinn: Well, I think compassion, compassionate communication is probably a way I think folks might resonate with that. And it really starts with ourselves. Um, you know, the voice we use within is often our harshest critic, and it, it becomes disabling, I think, of our best self, our compassionate self. And so, nonviolent communication starts with how are we talking to ourselves? Are we being compassionate? Are we being kind? Are we being judgemental of ourselves? And then from there, I think if we have that, if we can start to, to operate like that with

ourselves, within ourselves, then we can offer it to others. Offer compassion. Offer kindness. And, and notice how often we judge. I think nonviolent communication, one of my favorite aspects of it is, is, do you observe your world or do you judge your world? And, too often I think, we lean towards judging our world, and not just observing our world. And so, one of our practices is just, uh, looking at a picture and saying, what do you, what do you observe and what do you judge? And, and, we're often surprised each of us in the group at how many judgements come forth rather than observations of what's actually there.

Alexis Miles: Paul, you mentioned that we be highly judgmental of ourselves. Could you give an example of the internal dialogue that indicates that we are being judgmental of ourselves?

Paul Quinn: I think we use words like, "I shouldn't have done that." I think we commonly say, "I always do that." "I did that wrong thing, again." "I'm, I'm always making that same mistake." We use absolutes, and, and often in a very critical way. The other thing I think we do is we think that we, by ruminating, by, by thinking about what we did wrong, that we're somehow paying a penance. I don't know what, but we're paying a price, and really, there's nothing to be gained by that. We don't, we don't become more kind to compassionate by spending hours telling ourselves how bad we've messed up. And, we often do and, and it doesn't really serve us.

Alexis Miles: So, if I tell myself, for example, after a conversation, "Oh Alexis, you're such an idiot. Why do you say that?" That will be an example of violence toward myself, that I might also project out toward others.

Paul Quinn: Yes. And I think Alexis, that's exactly right, and, and I think it disables us from interacting well with others because we're so down on ourselves. It doesn't serve us in just being kind to other people because we're so down on ourselves.

Sam Fuqua: Can you tell us about your work in the, uh, the men's prison in, uh, Washington State?

Paul Quinn: Yeah. I'm struck by, first of all, what I would call the indoctrination of Department of Corrections. I think it's common. I wouldn't say Washington is, you know, more or less than others. And, it's an indoctrination. And, it starts with telling those being trained to go in that these are bad people. Um, you can't trust them. They'll manipulate you. Do not share anything personal with them. Oh, and did I mention, they're bad people? I really found that indoctrination very disturbing. Didn't dissuade me from going in, but very disturbing. And then, as I went in, I started to hear the humanity of those that are incarcerated. They have sons and daughters. They have, uh, partners. They have moms and dads. They suffer illness, you know. Somebody they love is ill and, and passes away, and they're in prison and they can't be with them. Just the pain of, of life when they're incarcerated, and how they still have the same love and care and concern for those in their world, and they often can't, um, they can't be for them in the way they want to be for them. And, and how they tell their stories. And really, their authenticity. Like, the, they often thank volunteers for coming in. And I say, you know, I come in because of you. I come in because your authenticity, your willingness to share, you don't have cars, you don't have houses, you don't have fancy clothes, you don't have clothes that you pick. So, so you just bring your authentic self. And I said, that's uncommon in my world, uh, outside. And so, I said, I come in because of

what you are, and who you are, and how you share that with me. And, and honestly, that's what I share with them. So I, I do share my personal vulnerabilities with them, and, and they say, thank you for you, you remind me of my humanity because you from the outside will share yourself with me. And wow, it's, uh, it's really a remarkable experience.

Alexis Miles: It sounds like you're saying that foundational to being in communication with a person and being able to resolve conflicts with people is that you have to see each other's humanity.

Paul Quinn: Yes. And, and really, I grew up saying that I wanted to impress you. In fact, I was thinking about this podcast and I thought, how am I gonna impress Sam and Alexis' listeners? That's, that's how I grew up. I wanted to impress. And nonviolent communication says, and, and I've seen it in the prison is, it's about willingness to be vulnerable. Will I be vulnerable? And so, if I will lead with vulnerability, other people will see a, a connection. They'll realize, they'll realize that, that I'm risking with them, and that I'm trusting them to hold my vulnerability. And, they know vulnerability, as do I. And, it's a great connector with each other. Even though we're different ages, you know, we have different skin color, we have different backgrounds, but this great connector is being willing to be vulnerable with each other and, and each of us knows when that's happening, and how meaningful that moment is.

Alexis Miles: Can you give an example of leading with vulnerability, and then an example of leading with pretense?

Paul Quinn: The vulnerability is, like I share with, I, I cover a section. Sometimes they ask me to cover it on empathy, and I, I tell them that I didn't know what empathy was until nonviolent communication. But it turns out that my first son, uh, died shortly after birth. And I, I tell, I, I don't tell, I share with these men that story going to the hospital, what it was like, and then I share with them that afterwards people would try to comfort, but they would do so by telling me I had a child in heaven or, or something, some such. But these two people, uh, Lind and Wendell, and I tell them they would just listen again and again and again and again. Like, we tell the story again and again and again. And, and they never tried to give sma, you know, kind of, wise answers. And what I share with them is, uh, you know, empathy is about being present with pain, and not trying to distract, not trying to block that experience. And so, that's being vulnerable is, is sharing with them the story of my son's life.

And also, that I didn't really understand empathy, and now I'm beginning to, because I had this model from, from these great friends. And then pretense is, I have lots of opportunities for pretense. Um, you know, where I can say, you know, they, they say you're a sponsor, you know, thank you for coming in. And, and I can just, I can say, you know, yeah, I'm glad to come in, and that kind of thing. But, but what I really want to say is it's, I am honored by being with you. And, um, but the pretense, and also the pretense is I, I, I wouldn't share with them that I've seen a therapist for many years. So, pretense is, you know, and I, I do, I share with them, like, I've been to a therapist, and I go to a therapist, and he helps me so much. And so, pretense would say, I wouldn't share that Alexis. It would be, it would be lowering myself and making me less impressive. And, and that's, you know, pretense gives you the sense that I'm gonna get your connection through you admired me, which is just not so.

Alexis Miles: Like, I have it all together.

Paul Quinn: Exactly.

Alexis Miles: Like, yeah, my life is all together. I've accomplished this. I've done that. And that kind of thing.

Paul Quinn: And, and, and I think I've grown up with, that was how people came to be my friend. But that's not really friendship. It's not really connection. It's really a false sense of connection. And, nonviolent communication has really opened this door as I've seen it. Like, I've seen it when I am vulnerable, and when others are vulnerable with me. Like, I can still tell you the name and the story that, that these men, the stories they told me. And, like, I see them when I come back in, and I'll see them, and I'll know their name, and I'll, like, we have this connection that's, that's really strong because of, because of vulnerability and being willing to, to share that with each other.

Alexis Miles: So Paul, you've shared that you grew up in a family that silently adopted cultural norms. So, what are some of the norms that you soaked up, you know, as you were growing up, and what made you start questioning those norms?

Paul Quinn: I think there was this silent, we're better. We're white, we're better. Um, we work harder. We're smarter. Our church is better. It was all about separation. It was all about saying, and I say there's this, like, overt, it wasn't so overt, it was this constancy of, like, we had this neighborhood, I mean really literally across the street, and it was a predominantly black neighborhood. We never went there. We never asked why we never went there. Those folks never came in our area. We never asked about that. We never asked why they weren't at our church. Like, that's what I mean. It was just silent consent to the norms. And, they were insidious, and they were pervasive, and they weren't spoken about. Uh, that would be true for LGBTQ+ people. Like, we never talked about it, but you knew they weren't okay. And so, what happened is, I started to meet people that showed me that was false.

And so, I can still remember person in Oklahoma. I worked with this kind person that didn't live where in Oklahoma where we lived. He went, he lived in Dallas and I, kind of, put it together over time that he thought he couldn't live with his partner in Oklahoma at that time. And so, we never saw him in any kind of other setting. And, he was this wonderfully kind and capable and amazing person. They had 'em over at the house. And so, my whole notion of these, what I think of as these truths, they were false. And, individual people over time showed me they were false again and again and again. And so, they eroded these supposed truths from being how I saw the world, and I'm, I'm grateful. It's all about interaction with people. It's clearly all about interaction with people. And there the truth, not these other dogmas or whatever they're called, it's their humanity, um, showed what was really true. It was experiential. Like, I experienced the truth, not I read it. I experienced it and I knew it was real.

Alexis Miles: That's what they say about proximity. The power of proximity to people that are different than the identities that we hold.

Paul Quinn: Yes.

Sam Fuqua: Paul Quinn, I wanna ask you about your service as a board member with The Sophia Way, a nonprofit that works to help end homelessness for women. And, perhaps in the context of what you just shared, what preconceived notions were eroded by that experience?

Paul Quinn: Well, that homelessness was, you're just not trying harder. You know, if you would just apply yourself, you wouldn't be homeless. And that there were simple answers to homelessness that we could provide in this nonprofit. And that people that weren't homeless were somehow doing something well, the people that were homeless weren't doing well. Those all got shattered just by being around folks and hearing the stories. Like, I was thinking about, you know, the stories of women that they were, you know, abused. They, they were veterans. And then, you know, had the trauma of their time and service. Uh, women, that their partners took all their money. I mean, and they had to figure out how to live. And so, I started to hear people's stories, and realized that there was not simple answers to homelessness and definitely not blame. I think, a big part of my upbringing was, let's affix blame. That somehow is a good thing. And, and I realized that that's not really, doesn't really get us anywhere. It doesn't help. It just seems to relieve the person who's affixing the blame of some kind of sense about people's humanity. There's just a lot to be learned from, from people who will share their stories, and again, their willingness to say that these simple answers don't really fit.

Sam Fuqua: What did you learn from the people who work with women experiencing homelessness? Did anything change, uh, after you heard their perspective?

Paul Quinn: Yes. I mean, I think they helped broaden the discussion to be not so simple, and so, you know, they were the, typically, they were, all the women were staff. All the staff members were women. And so, they helped me see how to try to bring this organization to help people, women, where they were, and try to get folks to donate to support that cause. And, they helped me see that, um, you could be action oriented and still see the variation of, the many vari, the diverse ways that women were affected by their circumstances, and you could still be action oriented. So they, I think they brought a sense we can bring action even though, like, one of my favorite things, Sam was when I would tell people about my work, you know, as a board member, they would say, well, you know, what's your success? You know, how do you get people into independent living? And so, what I came to say, which I didn't start out saying, is we help women become as independent living as they're able. And so, instead of saying, well, they have their own place and they have a job, which was, kind of, the initial, kind of, sense of it, like, we're gonna get 'em a job, we're gonna have 'em write a resume, we're gonna help find a place to live.

What I came to see is we're gonna help them become as independent as they're able, given what they faced in their lives. And, that seemed to me a more encompassing and a more truthful way to say how we were trying to help these women. The founder of The Sophia Way home, Lucy, said to me once, you know, you, I see people that are holding up the sign and wanting money, and this is the beginning of their journey, to be able to hold a job because they come certain place a certain time of day. They stay a certain amount of time. That's the beginning of them on a journey to be able to hold a job, and be able to become independent women. And, it's this, again, it's this reframing of how I see people that doesn't fit the, the, the A or B, good or bad. It starts to

strip that away and say, wow, this is the beginning for them of a journey back, and that is to be admired.

Alexis Miles: So, in your work supporting others, um, how have you seen conflict transformed into connection or healing?

Paul Quinn: Well, you know, when, when I'm in the right and wrong way of looking at things, right and wrong, there's a right answer here and a wrong answer here. Much of my life, that's how I lived. Um, conflict seems almost built in. It seems almost built in to not thinking about, um, another's point of view, and nonviolent communication is great because it starts to say, for me, it starts to open up the door to say, people all have needs. We all do. They're, they're the same needs, and we try to meet them differently. And so, it's really now becoming a journey of saying, there's more than one answer here. There's more than one way to look at this situation. 'Cause most times, Alexis, I was saying there's a right answer and there's a wrong answer, and I've got the right answer. So, that means you by definition have the wrong answer. So, it's my job to figure out how to get this conversation around to help you see that, that my right answer is where you need to land.

And so, it's very narrow and, and really doesn't, I think nonviolent communication begins for me this journey of honoring the diversity of people, honoring that they have needs, honoring that, that I need to hear them out. So, one of the big ones, I think, Alexis is, uh, is listening. Um, I think. I grew up saying I'm the white male guy, and I can, in all different settings, I can ask the most questions, I can talk the most, it's perfectly appropriate, and nothing's lost.And then, I went to this, um, nonviolent communication training. The very first one I ever went to and got, mid-morning, the leader said, not specifically to me, but I think it was to me, the, the word WAIT, the acronym W.A.I.T, which is, Why Am I Talking? And so, it, it, it started me saying, if I'm talking, I'm actually not hearing you because I'm talking. So, in different settings now, I say to myself all the time, wait, Paul, wait and listen, because what happens is I don't allow people that might not be as, find it as easy to take the floor. And I, I want to hear what they say now 'cause I missed it because I was so busy doing the talking, I was taking it through. And so, I, I want there to be space for others. So, I would say in a conflict setting, I'm trying to hear more and trying to persuade less, and there can be a time for that.

The other thing I would add is, you know, different folks, so I can think of folks at the prison that I've watched as we've had conflicts or disagreements about things, and I would note that, uh, and I'll say Trayvon and David, both of them, uh, African Americans, I watched how they would deal with conflict, and often what they would do is wait. They would wait, and they would allow the circumstance to unfold. So, it's, it's a disagreement, but they would allow it to unfold. They wouldn't jump in right away. And then, somehow, in the session they would come back to it and they would do so with, uh, with a nuance and with, uh, an attention to not shaming the other party, and I didn't know what that was. I experienced it with them and I said, wait a minute, isn't it about who's right and wrong? And actually, what they showed me is there's a way to say something is, is the way to go, but there's a way to do it so the other person isn't diminished. And, that is, uh, I think in all kinds of conflicts, that's a new experience for me. Um, how to care for another with, with, um, while not necessarily agreeing with them, but you have care for them and they know it. And, I experienced it and it's very new to me.

Alexis Miles: Can you give a concrete example so that listeners can follow through like the arc of a conflict where this process is used?

Paul Quinn: We would have discussions. Like, I'll pick nonviolent communication. We would have discussion sessions about how we were gonna do a program. And so, um, many of the folks that are incarcerated are mentors. They, they present programs too. And, and they're wonderful. And so, we would have a disagreement about do we wanna present this approach to, to this topic or, or this approach. And, I would typically jump in and say, well, I think it's this approach. Or, somebody else would say, it's this approach, and there'd be this back and forth. So, it'd be like, I think, we're gonna do a talk about how we judge others and how, how quickly we judge others instead of observe them, like I mentioned earlier. And so, the question is how to bring forth that activity that would allow us to see that. And, um, I would say my common way of doing it is, is back and forth. Like, well, I think this, you think that, I think this, you think that. And, and I think it's, like, we're gonna resolve this, like, right now, right here, there would be immediacy that I associate with how things are done.

And, what I would notice is that, like, Trayvon, David, they would just listen. They would give full attention, and then we would seem to have moved on. Like, we wouldn't come to a decision, and we would've seemed to have moved on. And so, I think part of it is there's not, they've taught me that there's not an immediacy needed to come to immediate resolution. That's not how I grew up. That was not very expedient, and we wanted be expedient. And then, they would come, so then, we'd be talking about other aspects of the program. And then they would say, you know, I think one of the ways we could help those that are in the program, you know, to do observe, observations differently is if we did this. And, um, and so, it, it was, and then we had, kind of, not gotten, so they also were really sensitive to, we weren't so wired up about it. So, there's a timing that they, I thought a nuance and a timing that I learned from them that I, I value very much.

Alexis Miles: That's a very good example. The power of attention and just giving it a little breathing room before trying to jump in with a solution.

Paul Quinn: Yes. And I think, for your listeners, just for me, this is a practice, this is a learning. And so, I would say I didn't, there's nothing about that I learned growing up. It's really experiencing other people and watching them in their presence that they taught me by who they were, and how they lived in this setting. They taught me. And so, we can, you know, there's nothing, we can learn it, we can practice it, we can, we can become more this way, we wish.

Sam Fuqua: You know, one thing I think is interesting about you as a guest on Well, That Went Sideways! Paul Quinn, is most of the people we interview, not all, but most, uh, are working as professionals in a certain field, and so we're drawing on their knowledge. This is not your paid work, right? You're a business finance guy. What would you say to people who are thinking, well, I, I don't know that I could learn this, or I'm trying to figure out where to give my time as a volunteer, but I don't have much. Maybe your experience in, in coming to this work and sharing how and why, uh, you've chosen to give your volunteer time in these ways might help someone as they're trying to decide how to be of service. Does that make sense?

Paul Quinn: Yes, I think so. And, I, I think, I'd like to think now that we, many of us have invitations, um, we're invited to engage with our community in different ways. And so, sometimes a friend will tell us that they're involved in a volunteer organization. We'll go, that's kinda interesting. That can be an invitation. And so, and the other thing I would say is we talked about the negative voice early on. Often, in these examples, like I, I imagine many listeners will listen to this and go, I could never go into the prison. And that voice starts going, the voice starts saying, I couldn't do it. It's not gonna work out, I'm afraid. It's, they're, they're, I'm not sure about them. And so, the voice goes running, and it starts running and predicting the future. And so, one of the things I'd say to your listeners is say yes to invitations. They're coming all the time, and they're not pressure, they're not, it's not guilt based, it's not driven by "you must" or "you should." All those things we talked about, that critical voice, it's really about invitations that come to your life.

And, the other thing I would say is come with your heart. It's good to go to a food bank. It's great to bring your hands, but come with your heart. Um, because those people you interact with, if you really are present to them, they can start to change your life, and just by being who they are. So, so I think there's, you know, you can pick thing, and it's in your community, you could just look up volunteering. But it's really come with your heart because you know your hands are needed, but your heart is what, uh, like, I tell, I've told incar, I've shared with the incarcerated folks that they enlarge my heart. They, they help my heart grow in its capacity and that can happen. And, and the other thing I would say is I've driven to the prison many times saying I don't know what I'm gonna say. Like, I, I don't, what do I know? There's the voice, right? And so, the voice is saying, I don't know. And, but what I can offer, Gregory Boyle's, one of my favorites, what I can offer is my attention. Like, I can always do that. I can always offer my complete undivided attention and listen to other people. I can do that. And, I think we can do that. We don't need special training. We don't need special skill. We just need a care, a caring heart, and a willingness to hear people's stories and they're remarkable.

Sam Fuqua: Paul Quinn, it's been a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you for spending time with, with our listeners.

Paul Quinn: I'm delighted to have been able to do so.

Sam Fuqua: Paul Quinn is an activist and volunteer in the Seattle area. For more on Marshall Rosenberg and Nonviolent Communication, you can read Rosenberg's book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*.

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