

## ...are such little hands...

translated from the German song by Bettina Wegner

### Achieve a lot with little money

Already for many years, the NVC trainer Gitta Zimmermann is engaged with children in distress. Here she traces her motivation.

*... are such little hands,  
tiny fingers on,  
you must never beat them,  
they will break then.*

I have often reflected upon what motivates me to care so much about children.

#### Five decades ago:

I grow up in a protective home, with all the time in the world for my sister and myself. My first encounter with sharing is at Christmas time when my mother takes both of us to visit our neighbors, armed with a recorder and Christmas biscuits. We play Christmas songs to elderly people with small belongings and bring smiles to their faces.

At the same time, in this impressionable stage, I come in contact with a society to whom obedience is of utmost importance. Children don't have the right to express their opinion, and it is not even considered that they have one.

Both of these influences led to my having a significant place in my heart for children of all colors and nationalities. I want to give them a voice.

#### Approximately 12 years ago:

Marshall Rosenberg recounts an exercise, where he tells a group of people:

"Someone has taken something from you and hadn't given it back."

Then he divides the group; to the one half he quietly says: "The person who took something and didn't give it back is your neighbor" and to the other half he says:

"It is your own child who did not give it back."

"What do you say to the 'thief' now?"

**When I nowadays conduct this exercise with parents and teachers, I notice that the answers of the first group are more respectful than the one in which the person concerned is one's own child.**

Then Marshall conducts a mind game: "Imagine your child is Gandhi!" I have chewed on this thinking experiment – until it causes an intensive rethinking process in me, as with many of the participants.

With how much respect to I approach my own child or other children?

Out of this attitude and my big desire for dignity, equality, and security for children I initiated the international workshops: "First call for children!", which I have already conducted 6 times in Ruhpolding. People who work with children, who live on the streets or in similar circumstances are invited to take part. Thus, participants come together from India, the Philippines and from several African countries and have one goal: to contribute to the well-being of children.

Many work with street children, either artistically on the street or in special workshops, some work in an HIV school, others in a `tribal` school, either with one-time child soldiers from South Sudan or with orphans, "young prostitutes", cyber-sex children, children in hospitals without a blanket or jumper, children who live on rubbish dumps.

**Again and again, I want to focus on these children, indirectly through the workshops and give them a voice.**

At the start of this workshop, I had the idea, to invite the children themselves. Unfortunately, this is difficult, as they often don't know their date of birth or don't have any parents to enter into a passport. And young teenagers, under the age of 18, at least in the Philippines, can't come through the borders, because the border patrol directs a very tight check on family relations. In enforcing this, the government wants to prevent human trafficking.

Over many years of awareness-raising work in the Philippines with the Cinemobil-Projects: the parents in the villages are made to realize, through mobile cinema, what happens to their children when they `sell` them. The buyers promise to occupy them as housekeepers in the big cities. Often, the parents sit at these meetings with open mouths and are shocked. Through various foundations and with cooperation from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Philippines have been downgraded in the grouping for human trafficking from the maximal rating of 5 to 3. The hard work in this country is paying off. I

For three days I conducted an NVC (Nonviolent Communication) workshop for so-called cybersex children, most of them from the slums of Cebu City, in the Philippines. Two other trainers worked parallel with the mothers. In the end, we joined both groups to form a circle.

**There, the mothers whispered sentences in their child's ear, sentences that we would love to hear or have spoken ourselves, like: "I like you just the way you are" or "You are a gift from heaven!"**

During and after this encounter, the discussions were open and intensive and – following the project leader – with lasting impacts.

The main impact of my work involves the passing on of knowledge in NVC, combined with microcredit projects to make it possible for the children to grow up in a safe and child-friendly way.

A project in Ethiopia is another example. Mothers are enlightened over health issues and basic of economics (not easy, as many of them are illiterate). They are given new clothes and 30€ start-up capital to build up their own business.

100 % of these women succeed in paying back this credit within 6 months. With this start capital, they are able to send their (on average 5) children to school. After this pilot project, we are now intensifying – with 400 women and with BMZ support. This project, which supports mothers, and consequently their children, gives me great satisfaction and it makes a lot of sense to me. I accumulate here many experiences, working with mothers, not with fathers. At the same time, these women get to know about NVC.

Meanwhile, the Ruhpolding workshop participants are keeping in contact with each other, exchanging ideas, complement and support each other emotionally. I am fortunate to belong to this group.

A Ruhpolding newcomer from India, a director of a school with 1000 students, starts tentatively her attempts to bring NVC to her school and is motivated and accompanied in our WhatsApp group. We share the responsibility.

**Education is most important for me at the present time. That's why I want it to be accessible for as many children as possible. I can often only offer small building blocks, as for example, an Internet café for children and families, who live on a rubbish dump in the Philippines. One student will become a nurse. She is very active and helps other children in the Internet Café as well as her family, in organizing small jobs.**

We built an orphanage in the Philippines, which is supported by an NVC trained family. There, the children learn to solve group conflicts in a nonviolent way and to take responsibility for their own activities, like vegetable growing and cleanliness at home. Some of them have taken the next step in further education at the university in IT or psychology. They are the ones, who, years ago, were searching for food in a rubbish container.

Also, young prostitutes in the Philippines, who worked through the anger- and self-empathy dance floor and learned how to be empathic with themselves, benefited in the long run from NVC.

*...are so little souls,  
open und free,  
you never can torture them;  
they will break.*

I have heard that in many locations in Africa, young people say that nothing can change their fate: "My path is given by God. I am in his mercy. I must obey him. I cannot change my life."

I am longing for understanding in this attitude.

In the workshops, in these countries, I now develop activities that might strengthen self-confidence. In my opinion, both living spiritually and managing life actively and self-responsible are possible.

One Ruhpolding participant from South Sudan, together with colleagues, freed in Nov. 2018 470 child soldiers from rebels. They are now in a safe child camp.

**When they are asked what the meaning of safety is for them, some draw a weapon. The children believe this means protection.**

To point out other strategies to the children to fulfill their desire for peace and protection is hard work. We did contact a man with trauma experience (David Bercelli, Trauma Release Exercise), who will now be actively involved in this field and will give supervisors and empathic hand.

*... is such a little backbone  
you hardly can see it.*

*You never are allowed to bend it,  
it will break.*

*Straight, forward people would be an excellent aim,  
we have enough people without a backbone.*

Information concerning the mishandling of children in some African schools and within their families shocked me: physical punishment is often used to "maintain discipline" and order. On top of this, there's an ex-cathedra teaching, many times inappropriate for young children, in my opinion.

Beside various child-related issues in NVC, which we worked on in the workshop, I've invited a games trainer to my Ruhpolding workshop, who taught us many games. In all activities, we worked on the transfer character of NVC with a particular focus on empowerment. As a pleasant side effect, we laughed a lot and had fun together. All the games need very little material (rubbish, like plastic bottles or toilet paper rolls) and are inexpensive and suitable for children to use in their native country. 2 of the 9 workshop days were filmed and can be viewed by everyone – my gift to all who enjoy the fun together.

<https://youtu.be/BRzm37Dphus>

I know, though speaking with the participants from the last Ruhpolding workshop, that the games are used internationally in Ghana, Kenia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Uganda, India and the Philippines with a lot of laughs and insights into NVC.

At the next workshop, we're going to expand the plan to have a combined theater performance and story-telling. Lups and Spotty are an example from a framework story, with a giraffe and a jackal, who have adventures in the jungle and gradually become friends. At the same time, we explain NVC in a way easy to understand.

All newsletters on my website can be downloaded and read out or used as inspiration for a theater. [www.drgz.de](http://www.drgz.de). Perhaps Lups and Spotty will leave footprints with some children?

I would be very interested for young people to join NVC – as I've experienced how swiftly issues are picked up and the NVC approach is adopted by them. I hope for a significant multiplier effect in this age group.

**The following example will illustrate how small an amount of money is needed for us to achieve something.**

In 2018, I found an envelope with 4 x 100 Francs inside, on a ski slope in Switzerland. I did not find the owner, so I sent it to 4 participants from Ruhpolding and asked them to either spend it on themselves or on a small project – whatever pleased them.

**The results:**

- In the Philippines, a graduation party was organized. One Ruhpolding participant graduated in social work and as a former street child (with drugs and prison experience), he bought a pig and some cakes, and the invited street children could really pig out.
- A workshop was held in Ghana, where NVC was explained playfully, with food and drinks.
- Blankets and shoes were bought for children in the hospital in Johannesburg, as the winter there can be icy.
- And in a school for tribal children and orphans in India, after discussion with the children, banana bushes were planted. In 3 years, they'll harvest 2573 kg bananas. Each child was given 3 seedlings, which they were allowed to take home to plant. In 3 years, 2166 children and indirectly 8 families will benefit from the cultivation. All for 100 Francs!

In case one of the readers would like to have very impressive (for me) literature on these themes, I would highly recommend the book written by Alfie Kohn: "Unconditional parenting," Atria, 2006

I send to all readers cheerful, giraffe-strong greetings, and I want to close this journey into the world of children, which I repeatedly make myself aware of, with a prayer from Ina H. Hughes:

We pray for children  
who sneak popsicles before supper,  
who erase holes in math workbooks,  
who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food,  
who like ghost stories,  
who can never find their shoes.

And we pray for those  
who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire,  
who can't bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers,  
who are born in places we wouldn't be caught dead in,  
who never go to the circus,  
who live in an X-rated world.

We pray for children  
who sleep with the dog and bury the goldfish,  
who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions,  
who get visits from the tooth fairy,  
who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money.

And we pray for those  
who never get dessert,  
who have no safe blanket to drag behind them,  
who watch their parents watch them die,  
who can't find any bread to steal,  
who don't have any rooms to clean up,  
whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser,  
whose monsters are real.

We pray for children  
who spend all their allowance before Tuesday,  
who shove dirty clothes under the bed, and never rinse out the tub,  
who don't like to be kissed in front of the carpool,  
who squirm in church or temple and scream in the phone,  
whose tears we sometimes laugh at and  
whose smiles can make us cry.

And we pray for those  
whose nightmares come in the daytime,  
who will eat anything,  
who have never seen a dentist,  
who aren't spoiled by anybody,  
who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep,  
who live and move, but have no being.

We pray for children who want to be carried  
and for those who must,  
for those we never give up on and  
for those who don't get a second chance,  
for those we smother.....  
and for those who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to offer it.