Introduction to the New Edition: The Development of NVR

Non-violent resistance (NVR)[1] is an approach to families, schools, and communities that is inspired by the doctrine championed by Mahatma Gandhi and by Martin Luther King, Jr. At first sight, it may seem puzzling that an approach that was developed for resisting political oppression effectively and morally should be found relevant for helping parents of children with behavior problems. Parents are not usually in a position of weakness relative to their children, nor do they experience themselves as oppressed. Nevertheless, the moment we[2] understood that the principles and methods of sociopolitical NVR could help in our therapeutic work with parents, enormous possibilities opened up. To understand this, we must recapitulate what, in our view, was missing (and still is) in psychotherapists' work with parents.

Many parents who come for help are confronted with highly stressful situations that require their response. A boy beats up his sister and humiliates her before her friends; a teen shuts himself up in his room after voicing dire threats; parents receive a call from the police that their daughter has been found totally drunk – these and other acute situations require a parental reaction. And the parents do react, for remaining helpless and in extreme worry is also a reaction, though probably not a very helpful one. Very often parents come for therapy with such a sense of urgency.

In such situations, the parents often feel they need a practical and simple solution; a clear sense of direction. The reason they need it to be simple is that they are so stressed and confused that they cannot

[1] Readers who are unacquainted with parental NVR should perhaps read Chapters 1 to 3 before this Introduction, which is mainly concerned with developments that took place after the first edition of this book was published.

[2] I will usually prefer to speak in the first-person plural, as NVR is the product of intense collaboration with students, colleagues, and therapeutic teams.

process very complex information. But we, psychotherapists, are not at our best with simple solutions. We are trained to search for complexity. We tend to be suspicious of simple explanations. Maybe this is one of the reasons we are attracted to the profession: the wish to search for what is not obvious, to trace richer and hidden processes. This disparity between the parents' immediate need and the counselor's tendency to focus on complexity may be a bad omen for the burgeoning working alliance.

This was the first challenge we faced in developing an approach for helping parents of impulsive, violent, or self-destructive children. We had to find a way to give the parents from the very outset a clear sense of direction, a kind of "parental-North" by which they could orient themselves. Something they could identify with, that would reduce their confusion and helplessness and make them feel they had a therapeutic partner who was mindful of their distress and sense of urgency. We wanted an initial guiding concept that would make the parents come out of the first encounter engaged and hopeful.

The concept of *parental presence* seemed to fulfill this role in a promising way. When helpless and worried parents came to us, we found that talking to them about increasing their presence in the life of their child had an immediate engaging effect. We defined parental presence as the experience inherent in acts that convey the message, "I'm your parent! You can't fire me, divorce me, or paralyze me. I'm here and I'll stay here!" When we talked to parents in this vein, they became alert, responsive, and motivated. The concept of parental presence seemed to galvanize them into a readiness to listen and act that was all but lacking in their previously defeated stance.

In the initial years of our work with parents, parental presence remained our major concept. We searched for ways in which parents could manifest their presence; how they could regain their voice, their place, their influence. We profited greatly from the work of Gerald Patterson, Salvador Minuchin, Jay Haley, and Milton Erickson. But we always tried to subsume our borrowings from these various masters under the concept of parental presence. In this way, our work and

message remained unified, although we borrowed eclectically from many sources. We gradually came to emphasize that not only should the child experience the parents as present but also the parents themselves should feel that they had a voice, filled space, and had weight and significance in the life of the family. This work culminated in the publication of *Parental Presence: Regaining a Leadership Role in Bringing Up Our Children* (Omer, 1999).

Already when I was writing that book, I became aware of cases in which the idea of parental presence was misinterpreted. Some parents understood it as meaning they should achieve full control over the child. This interpretation might lead some parents to go home and set up barricades, conveying inappropriately dominant messages. Thus understood, parental presence could lead to escalation. Those difficult cases led me to add a chapter to the book, proposing possible ways to reduce the escalation that might arise as a consequence of the parents' manifestation of decided presence. With the addition of this chapter I was able to publish the book without worrying too much about the potential negative consequences of its message.

But this ad hoc solution was insufficient. The danger of escalation is not just a casual consequence of the parents' manifestation of presence but is intrinsically connected to it. It is almost the other side of the coin. Many parents lose their presence precisely because their attempts to manifest presence lead to sharp reactions by the child and to frightening escalation bouts. Considering escalation as a possible side-effect that could be remedied by palliative measures would not do. Presence and escalation had to be considered in their intrinsic mutual connection. NVR provided an answer to this challenge.

NVR is probably the only model of social struggle that is carried out by and through the personal, emotional, and moral presence of the activists. The fight is not conducted by throwing stones, arrows, spears, and bullets from a distance, but by the determined presence of the activists, which conveys the message, "We are here! We stay here! We won't budge!" NVR is also the only kind of resistance in which the activists are rigorously trained to avoid all acts of violence,

as well as all provocations, denigrations, and offensive acts that might lead to escalation. The reason is both moral and strategic. The force of NVR is a function of its ability to stimulate positive voices in the adversary camp; voices that are opposed to the continuation of their own violent and oppressive acts. These positive voices say: "They are the moral side! We are the bad guys!" These voices, however, can only be efficiently fostered if the resisting camp avoids violence and deliberate offensive acts, which would justify the dominant side in pursuing its oppression.

Sociopolitical NVR did far more to further our approach to parenting than showing that presence and escalation are the two sides of the same medal. The reason is that leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. were not only inspiring political figures but also master strategists. They created a detailed lore about how to translate those principles into day-to-day practice. They developed cadres of trainers and field leaders that helped transform a moral political philosophy into a highly effective resistance machine. Fortunately, the richness of NVR's principles, strategies, and tactics found their ideal historian and codifier in the figure of Gene Sharp. His classic book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973) is like the Talmud of NVR, providing guidelines for every imaginable situation and detailing each tool of resistance in all contexts of implementation.

The work of translating sociopolitical NVR into the family context was rendered possible by Gene Sharp's book. With the help of a few dedicated students, each intervention, strategic principle, tactical measure, and training idea was examined in detail for its potential in the field of parenting. The marriage between this work and our previous experience with parental presence led to the first edition of this book (Omer, 2004), and particularly to our manual for parents (see Chapter 3). Each and every step in the manual combines decided parental presence with the prevention of escalation. The manual became the basis of our treatment and gave us a good starting point for our research program.

When the book was first published (Omer, 2004), we believed, somewhat optimistically, that most of our conceptual and clinical work was accomplished. We thought that, having a clear treatment manual at hand, we could concentrate all our efforts on research. However, another challenge was soon to appear, showing that we were far from finished on the theoretical and practical fronts.

The first inkling of this challenge came from the parents who attended our lectures on NVR. These parents came up with a recurring question: "You are presenting a method to deal with very serious problems. But does it also allow us to deal with routine difficulties?" One father posed the question in a plastic way: "You are offering a cure for cancer. But our children usually suffer from the common cold! Have you got something for that?" One mother asked facetiously: "My daughter is fifteen months old, but already stubborn and angry. Should I perform a sit-in?"[3] These parents were asking us about the preventive and normative function of NVR. But this was not how NVR had originally been conceived. The very idea of *resistance* implies something highly problematic that should be tenaciously resisted. To show that NVR could fulfill a positive, preventive, or normative parenting function, we needed a new concept.

This is what led us to the model of *the new authority*. Authority is not necessarily exercised "against something" but is also what prevents any such "somethings" from reaching worrisome proportions. I think that what the parents who asked those questions were implying is that NVR might perhaps point the way toward a positive kind of authority. However, they felt rightly that this was not clear in the original model. The job of spelling it out turned out to be more difficult than we had expected. Seven years of patient work separate the first edition of *Non-Violent Resistance* from *The New Authority: Family, School and Community* (Omer, 2011). To perform this complex task, we had to understand why traditional authority had lost its acceptability, and how an alternative form of authority could be

[3] For a detailed description of the "sit-in," see Chapter 3.

developed; one that was legitimate, attractive, and practicable for our generation and society. Fortunately, a lot of work had already been done by others, especially by scholars inspired by Diane Baumrind's seminal work (Baumrind, 1971, 1991; Larzelere, Morris, & Harrist, 2013), delineating the difference between authoritarian and authoritative styles of parenting.

It is hard to exaggerate the impact of the widespread social critique of the traditional model of authority. This process, which began sometime in the late 1960s and continues almost unabated today, divested the image of authority that was broadly accepted up to that point from its educational and moral fundaments. The gross result is that traditional authority lost the adherence not only of most parents and teachers but also of professionals, writers of popular books on child-rearing, the law, and the media. When I was developing the ideas that led to the new authority, I consulted a number of parenting books and newspaper articles about problematic children that were written in the 1950s. The ruling idea was that problems were mostly caused by lax upbringing and the solution lay in stricter rules and discipline. Going over to what was written from the 1970s onwards, one gets the impression that problems are mostly caused by too much rules and discipline, and the solution lies in replacing them with unconditional acceptance. The chief pillars of traditional authority that have become unacceptable for us are distance, control and obedience, strict hierarchies, and swift retribution.

Distance was once viewed as a hallmark of authority. The adult with authority should not be too close to the child, under pain of compromising their authority. The child was supposed to look at authority figures from a distance and from lower down. The authority figure should stand on a pedestal, a condition that was perpetuated by a host of rules and conventions. We do not accept this any longer. We want to be close to our children, not distant. We also want our child's teachers to be close and accessible. An authority that required distance to be maintained would lose its appeal and legitimacy in our eyes.

The goal of authority was to achieve *control and obedience*. The role of parents and teachers was to control and that of children to obey. An educational process would be deemed successful if it resulted in obedient children. We do not accept this anymore. If children are too obedient, we view the process as a failure. We want to bring up children who are autonomous and show initiative. Parents and educators are expected to foster these qualities.

Our society has become highly suspicious of *strict hierarchies*; more so if the people high up expect immunity to critique. We have learned that many parents, teachers, and other people with authority have badly abused their position. Therefore, our society has come to expect and demand transparency.

Traditional authority was built on *swift retribution.* This expectation was epitomized by the lightning-bolts that Jupiter held in his hand. It was believed that punishment had to be immediate, so that children would not imagine they had any leeway for wavering. We do not accept this anymore. Immediate punishment is usually meted out at the height of emotional arousal. This leads to escalation. The expectation that punishment be swift also precludes rational deliberation. It thus becomes almost a guarantee for disproportionate reactions.

The critique against traditional authority was so overwhelming that, at least for a while, it led to the belief that all authority was damaging. Authority was not the solution, but the problem. If children showed signs that they were not developing well, one should search for the authority that warped their development. A child was unmotivated? One should look for the oppressive authority that kept them so. A child was anxious? One should look for the rejecting authority that undermined their self-reliance. A student was slow? One should look for the stiff educational principles that smothered their curiosity.

Expectations for an educational process that would be freed from the shackles of authority soared. Children would grow up curious, spontaneous, creative, and pro-social. Freedom was the salt of education. Every child was believed to be born with the seed of a true

self, which could only blossom if it were not deformed by restraints that went against its nature. On this view, authority made children into "little boxes," as immortalized in Pete Seeger's song. Only a fully free education could make us and our society wholesome.

This big hope was badly disappointed. Diane Baumrind's (1971, 1991) pioneering research on the effects of permissive and authoritarian parenting styles showed them to be equally damaging to development.[4] In contrast, the authoritative style of parenting, which seemed to strike a balance between the two, was shown to lead to much better results. The question, however, was: What are the bases of such a positive authority? This question required a clear answer, because in our critique of traditional authority, we had all but divested it of all its fundaments. What we needed was not only the same old authority with a more human face but a new image of authority, one that appealed to the aspirations and values of our generation.

Developing such a new image, a new authority that would appeal to our needs and wishes as parents, teachers, and caregivers, was our next challenge. Such new authority should offer an answer to those parents who had asked us if NVR could also help prevent the problems it had originally been developed to fix.

How could we go about defining such a new model of authority? We could not create it *ex nihilo* but had to base it on existing insights and intuitions. Otherwise, it would remain a theoretical chimera. Fortunately, we had two starting points: (a) We knew what we *did not* want, such as an authority based on distance, control and obedience, rigid hierarchies, and swift retribution. Knowing what one does not want suggests what one may want instead. What we needed were new foundations for our authority that would replace those features of the old authority that we rejected; (b) Most of us have come across persons with authority who do not correspond to the traditional model. Those exceptional people somehow succeeded in arousing

[4] See also Larzelere, Morris, and Harrist (2013) for a selection of articles reviewing this evidence.

our respect, although they were not at all distant, controlling, imperious, or retaliatory. The question was whether we could map out their secret, rather than attributing it to a mysterious charisma. Our model of the new authority was developed by following those two heuristic principles: replacing the unacceptable bases of traditional authority and checking our image of the new authority against that of people with authority that we respect. The application of those principles led to the formulation of four basic pillars for the new authority: *presence*, *self-control*, *support*, and *persistence.*

Presence: We know that we do not want authority to be based on distance. The alternative is to base it on decided presence. When parents and teachers increase their presence, they build their authority. Acts that say, "I am here and will stay here!" elicit recognition. Such parents and teachers cannot be ignored. They stay close and remain in the child's mind, even when not physically present. This mental side of presence broadened the more immediate meaning of the concept in the first edition of this book (Omer, 2004). Where we had previously thought of presence as the way by which the parent actually resists the child's problematic behaviors, we now came to view it also as a mental accompaniment. In effect, preventing problematic behaviors rather than only resisting them requires that the parent be present in the child's mind. This understanding led us to a broader and deeper formulation of presence, which we named *vigilant care* (Omer, 2011, 2017). This idea corresponds to one of our central intuitions about people with positive authority. We know that these people stay in our minds, accompanying us through difficult times. We think about them, among others, because we believe that they think about us. It is this mental accompaniment that leads children to internalize the values of their parents. We hypothesized that vigilant care is the kind of presence that is gradually transformed into self-care. The concept of vigilant care was to have a salient career in theory, practice, and research (Omer, Satran, & Dritter, 2017).

Self-control: We do not want authority to be based on strict control that aims at blind obedience. The alternative is to base

authority on self-control. Self-control is a source of authority in a double sense. First, we spontaneously respect people with authority that display self-control, in contrast to authority figures that flip out in authoritarian rages. Second, we respect people with authority who fulfill their duties conscientiously. This is the positive side of self-control. Being imbued with a high sense of responsibility emanates a kind of authority that is the opposite of that of arbitrary tyrants. Such authority figures do not say, "You'll do this because I say it!" but rather "I'll do this because it is my duty!"

Support: Our society is suspicious of steep hierarchies, especially when accompanied by immunity to critique. The alternative is a broad-based authority, in which the person in the leading role is "authorized": upheld and legitimated by a supportive network. This person does not say "I" when referring to their role, but rather "we." Even when they are the leader that carries the actual responsibility, they do it as the representative of a larger network. This kind of authority is more horizontal, whereas traditional authority aimed to be strictly vertical. Far from diluting their strength, parents, teachers, and caregivers who create and utilize a support network gain enormously in legitimate power. We have shown that the constitution of a support network for parents and teachers is probably the most empowering step in our whole program. Involving supporters has the additional advantage of engendering transparency, thus reducing arbitrariness.

Persistence: Our society rejects the principle of swift retribution as a legitimate characteristic of authority. The alternative is to base authority on persistence. Immediate reactions create a superficial and momentaneous kind of authority. Persistence, in contrast, engenders continuity and depth. The parental "No!" stops existing only in and for the moment, but becomes a message that is taken up again, today, tomorrow, and the next week. Parents and teachers that persevere discover that their authority grows larger, steadier, and deeper because it stands on the pillar of time.