

LIVING THE LANGUAGE OF COMPASSION

An Interview with Marshall Rosenberg, Author of *Nonviolent Communication*

By Michael Bertrand

Managing Editor of Branches of Light, Banyen Books and Sound, <http://www.banyen.com>

Marshall Rosenberg, author of *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (\$24.95, paper) provides tools for reviving “The lost language of humankind, the language of a people who care about one another and long to live in harmony.” Raised in a turbulent Detroit neighbourhood, he developed a keen interest in conflict resolution and new forms of communication as peaceful alternatives to the violence he encountered. He gained a Ph.D in clinical psychology, but was dissatisfied with the focus on pathology he found there. His subsequent study of comparative religions, and his own varied life experience convinced him that human beings are not inherently violent, and motivated him to develop the communication process he calls Nonviolent Communication (NVC).

He has provided training and initiated peace programs in a number of war-torn areas, including Rwanda, Burundi, Nigeria, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Sierra Leone, The Middle East, Columbia, Serbia, Croatia and Northern Ireland.

I talked with him last month (March, 2004) over the telephone during his recent teaching stay in Quebec City.

Michael Bertrand: *You emphasize a language of compassion. I gather you mean compassion for others as human beings rather than as enemies or adversaries.*

Marshall Rosenberg: Exactly. We could say it's a language of compassion, but it's really a language of life in which compassion comes naturally when we connect with it. The mechanics show how to express what's alive in us and other people. Once we get clear what's alive we look at what we can do to enrich that life.

By alive you mean what is really at the bottom of what a person is saying?

In a sense, yes. What's alive is basically two things: what the person is feeling and how their feelings are connected to their needs. What's the status of a person's needs right now? If their needs are being met, which ones are met and how do they feel, and if their needs are not being met, which ones are not being met and how do they feel? So the language of life is basically the language of feelings and needs.

It seems that when you pursue that line of communication, reflecting back what is then said, your examples indicate that people seem to become less angry or less violent.

I would say it's even more powerful than that. When you get people connected to with what's alive in each other and you transform enemy images that imply wrongness, when you get people out of their heads in these enemy images, and you get them connected to what everybody's needing, it's amazing how people who earlier were wanting to hurt one another now want to contribute to each other's wellbeing. In our trainings I try to help both sides see the humanness of each other and the needs. All human beings have the same needs, so when people can see the needs of the other person they don't see an enemy. We haven't been taught how to communicate that. We haven't been taught how to be in touch with life. We've been taught a language of domination for about eight thousand years that's designed to get people to obey authority. It's quite a shift for people to move away from enemy images that define badness in the other person and to instead just express what's alive in you - what are your needs that aren't being met? It's a radical paradigm shift.

I read a quote from you that "We have to learn to communicate because nothing else will protect us from terrorism in this world."

I don't remember saying exactly that, but I do talk a lot about terrorism. These terrorists are not just something that popped up today. It's by not listening to the needs of the people who are doing it—thirty years in the case of Sept. 11. For thirty years people in the Arab world have been trying to express deep pain that they feel when the government uses sacred land for military bases to protect its oil interests. That's enormously painful to people who are seriously trying to live in harmony with their religion. When thirty years ago they expressed it in a kind of mild way we didn't listen, and it's been increasing every since.

You mean the bases in Saudi Arabia?

Yes. And there's many examples of our using areas in those regions for our economic interests and not really listening to the pain that creates for people in terms of their spirituality.

The idea, then, is that Nonviolent Communication can work to defuse a lot of political hot-spots, if they're allowed to?

Yes, if we have enough time we hope to really contribute. I was brought into Rwanda by a gentleman who studied with me in a peace studies program in Austria and he told me exactly what was going to happen in his country if he didn't do something quickly. So I went there four months before the genocide there started and we had a two year plan to train people in the hope of preventing the violence.

We started off with about seventy human rights workers, but we were there four months before it got started. It was too late to prevent what happened, but now we have a sustainable program that's now trying to use our training in reconciliation and to build for the future.

We're also working in other war-torn areas

Do you also find that looking at the needs invariably works or do you find that with some people it just cannot?

I've never found anybody we cannot connect with if we have time and patience and courage. For example, I was working in the prisons in Sweden. The administrators were very impressed with what I was doing with the prisoners, because these were pretty tough guys – long-termers - but they wanted to test it. So they said to me, "We put a new man in your group today. We know he's killed five people, some say eight. We want to see how you're going to work with a guy like this." I walked in the room and this guy was big. He had tattoos all over him and he stared at me in a way that would scare anybody and knowing that he'd killed these people I was pretty scared. So, I didn't live our process. I didn't confront him and tell him how scared I was and try to understand how he felt. He glared at me for two days without saying anything and I was just inside getting angry at the officials wondering why they put this monster in my group.

You could say I wasn't successful with him for two days because I wasn't living the process. I wasn't telling him what was going on in me and I wasn't trying to connect with what was going on in him.

Finally, I saw that going on at the end of the second day and the next day got my courage up and confronted him. I told him how scared I was and that I needed to know what was going on with him when he didn't say anything and when I heard what got him into prison. It made it easy for me to want to avoid him.

Well, he started to open up and be a real person. Once I started to do my share, things started to shift. Whenever I've had the time and the courage I've yet to see that I'm not going to like where it ends up.

Patience, time and courage, yes.

For example, in Nigeria I started off with the twelve chiefs from the Christian side on one side of the table and twelve from the Muslim tribe on the other. I asked them a question that's central to our training about needs which was, "I'd like whoever wants to tell me what needs of yours are not being met in this conflict." I said I was

confident that if everyone could hear one another's needs that we would find strategies for meeting everyone's needs.

A chief from the Christian tribe screamed, "You people are murderers", and they other side replied, "You've been trying to dominate us." So, I asked for needs and not surprisingly got a diagnosis of pathology, which is why we have violence on the planet. We haven't been educated in that way. I had to work hard to help them to translate these enemy images into unmet needs.

Our training is based on the assumption that all criticism and blame is a tragic expression of the needs of the speaker. So, beneath this murderer, it wasn't too hard to guess that his need was for safety. I said, "Chief, are you saying your need for safety isn't met by how things are being dealt with?" He was shocked because he's not used to talking from inside where his needs are - he's used to calling people names - but after reflection he said, "You're damn right."

Then I asked if someone from the Muslim tribe would please reflect back what the chief said his needs were, so they could see another human being like them. Of course, they were in too much pain to do that, so one of the Muslim chiefs screamed, "Then why did you kill my son." (I'd been told that three people there knew that someone who'd killed their child was in the room.)

Well, it's not easy to get people not only to say their needs but to hear each other's needs, but after working hard at this for about an hour one of the chiefs said to me, when he saw the change in the atmosphere in the room when we went from calling names to seeing what everybody's needs were, "If we know how to communicate this way we don't have to kill each other."

That must have been quite a gratifying moment.

I get a lot of those. I see people who initially want nothing more than to kill the other person when they come into a room and I have no doubt that given enough time they'll walk out caring about each other's wellbeing. I do this in restorative justice work, where I might be working with a woman who's been raped by a man. I have them both in the same room and in the beginning she'd like to see him killed, but I know that if we can connect them with each other's needs and understand each other at a certain level we'll end up with restorative justice. That means harmony restored - both people will be concerned with each other's wellbeing.

Unfortunately that's not how our judicial system is set up. It's set up to punish people and make them suffer for what they've done. That's why our network is very strongly supportive of restorative justice and we work with different groups around the world to transform our present system.

Would you call the listening and the compassion that it requires the spiritual component of Nonviolent Communication?

The spiritual component is that we believe it's our nature as human beings to enjoy contributing to one another's well-being. There's nothing we love more than that. However, as much as we love to do that, if we hear a demand to do something it takes all the joy out of it. If there's any criticism or punishment used to try to get us to do something it takes all the joy out of it. So, the spiritual component is that we human beings enjoy nothing more than contributing to one another's well-being.

Of course, when you say that it can look very naive in the face of all the violence around the planet, but, as theologian and anthropologist Walter Wink explains in his writings, that violence is created by the kind of social structures we've been creating for about eight thousand years which required us to be educated in tools of domination. We're living in a society where some people call themselves superiors and claim to have the right to use punishment and reward on people to get them to behave properly.

Then we're trying to live in this time in a way that will counteract an awful lot of societal programming.

An awful lot. It's been going on a long time. For example, in our schools we use a radically different language. We don't like teachers to use words like 'right', 'wrong', 'good', 'bad', 'have to', 'should'. When you first suggest this to teachers their eyes widen and they can't imagine going through a day without using such language. We

then show them how that language is part of the language of domination and that there are cultures around the world that do not have such language and have almost no violence.

Just to change the language itself is a big thing, but it's more than that. It's the consciousness that your objective is to get people to do what you want them to do. Parents, teachers and managers see it as their job to make people behave. That's quite a radically different objective than we're suggesting: create a connection that will allow everyone's needs to get met. So, it's not an easy paradigm shift to get people to go through.

Of course it isn't. In schools I suppose people are also coming from the perspective that we have to do things a certain way because that's the way things get done.

Except we have some pretty good statistics now that things get done when people see each other's needs and see how they can contribute to one another's needs. Children are much more likely to get the basics in our schools and there's much less violence. Things get done more willingly out of a natural motivation of enriching life, which is different than doing things to get rewards in the form of grades in schools or salaries later on, or in order to avoid punishment. It's a different world when you see how it's going to enrich life than to operate from a reward and punishment motivation.

You're really indicating that our natural nature is to be compassionate and caring about others, that this is where we really want to function from and we have this layer over top which is preventing us from functioning that way. We don't even know, in a way, that we want to function in the right way.

For about the last ninety years the theory has been that we're basically animalistic - selfish, violent, like tigers and such - and therefore have to be controlled by more evolved people who call themselves superiors. That's where we get into punishment and reward. We have this belief that human beings are basically selfish and dangerous. I work in about forty-five countries and in every one I often ask to start with this question, just to introduce the group to our process and its purpose: "I'd like you all to think of something you did in the last day or so that in some way, little or big, did kind of enrich someone's life and made them feel better. Maybe you cooked a meal for someone or just touched someone. Whatever it was think of something you've done in the last twenty-four hours or so." Everybody can usually think of something pretty quickly.

It's hard for them often because so many things we do like this we don't even think of it, but I get everybody to think of that. Then I say, "Now, just focus for a second on how you think that behaviour enriched the person? How do you think it made them feel? What needs got met?" They focus on that.

You can already see just a shift in their eyes just thinking of that. Then I say, "Now you have that in focus how do you feel when you see how your actions enrich the life of other people?" They usually say they feel wonderful and joyful. Then I ask them if anybody knows anything that's more fun to do and in the forty-five countries I've never had anybody tell me they can find anything more enjoyable to do than to willingly contribute to people's well-being.

So, it's not that I'm basing my belief that this is natural on some political statement that we should all be loving. I think it's in our nature. I think our species depends for its survival on our getting more joy out of contributing to one another's well-being than domination, punishment and so forth.

As Gandhi says, to change the world outside you have to live the change you want to see. So, we usually start with that in training and then we show people how to do it with their children, their life partners and people at work. Then we extend to social change. We get people to see it's a good start to change ourselves, but we also have to transform the gangs that are creating the violence on the planet.

I'm not so worried about street gangs, but there are other ones that call themselves governments or multi-national corporations and they co-operate. The corporations and governments gang up together and cause much of the violence we have. So, we include the level of social change in our training, of how to transform organizations at all levels so they support compassionate giving. We all know that compassion is how we're meant to live but our structures don't support it.

That's a whole other topic, to start with individuals but then move into the greater community. Can you go into the CEO's and managing directors' offices and start from that level?

We show people how to start at all three levels at the same time, because most of us in this incarnation are not ever going to be fully liberated ourselves from what we've incorporated in childhood up to the present moment. So, if we're going to wait until we're fully evolved we're not going to be able to contribute much to transforming the structures.

On the other hand, if we go after the structures out of the old consciousness we're just going to create more of this. So we show people how to work at all three of these levels at the same time.

Thank you for your time.

Other books include:

Nonviolent Communication Companion Workbook

A Practical Guide for Individual, Group or Classroom Study,

by Lucy Leu, \$27.95, paper

Life enriching Education:

Nonviolent Communication Helps Schools Improve Performance, Reduce Conflict, and Enhance Relationships

by Marshall Rosenberg \$17.95, paper

Speaking Peace

Connecting with Others through Nonviolent Communications

By Marshall Rosenberg

\$27.95, 2 cassettes; \$34.95 2 CDs