

# Nonviolent Communication

An interview with Dr Marshall Rosenberg PhD  
by Dunja Müller

People everywhere are protesting, attending marches, fighting for civil rights and most start as nonviolent. The Covid-19 pandemic has made people everywhere more aware of the real challenges humanity faces. Perhaps this crisis will lead the world toward a shift in consciousness – to a worldwide increase in co-operation instead of conflict, violence and competition to more awareness of the basic needs of our fellow human beings.

Marshall B. Rosenberg (1934-2015) was the founder and director of Educational Services of the Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC), a global organization located in California, USA, whose vision is a world where everyone values everyone's basic human needs and lives from a consciousness that connects with the universal life energy and natural oneness of all life. In this vision, people are using Nonviolent Communication (NVC) to create and participate in networks of worldwide life-serving systems in economics, education, justice, healthcare, and peacekeeping – based on compassion for each other. NVC focuses on shared human values and needs and encourages the use of a language that increases good-will. Marshall Rosenberg was a Clinical Psychologist who provided his training program in more than 60 countries – working with groups such as educators, managers, mental health and healthcare providers, lawyers, military officers, prisoners, police, clergy, government officials, and individual families.

Dunja Müller participated in an International Intensive Training in Switzerland with Marshall B. Rosenberg and interviewed him for *Share International*.

*Share International: Dr Rosenberg, you run a lot of training programs in many countries. What do participants hope to learn from your training?*

Marshall Rosenberg: Most often the people are interested in how our training can connect them more lovingly with the people in their families. Parents want to use it with children. Husbands and wives are interested and people want to use it with their parents. Some are interested in our training to apply it in schools. We train teachers, parents and children to participate in what we call “life enriching education”. In some countries people are interested in reconciliation – like

in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Israel and Palestine, Serbia and Croatia. We train people who have been in wars on how to live in harmony with each other; in some countries we also work with the military and police.

We show them how to train and apply Nonviolent Communication within themselves, how to learn from human limitations without losing self-respect, and how this applies in relationships with other people. In our International Intensive Trainings, we also go into another important application of NVC, which is “social change”. We show people how it can be used in changing structures so that the structures support compassionate interaction between the people.

*SI: NVC is often said to be a “language of the heart”. How can one communicate from the heart?*

MR: What we mean by the “language of the heart” is to express what is alive in oneself. All options I work with, all variations, of that question: “What is alive in you?” Often people have different values and typically use a form of language that teaches people to judge “what other people are”. NVC is a language that shows people how to evaluate oneself and other people with a reference to what our needs are. To evaluate what is going on inside. So, this is radically different from judging people's behavior in terms of “right/wrong”. Those judgments imply that if you are judged negatively then you deserve to be blamed or punished for what you've done. So, such a language is a form of violence. NVC connects people at the natural level – what are your needs and if they are met.....? And if not – what can be done to better meet them? And we show people how to stay with that – even if the other person has been educated to think in terms of criticism, blame and judgments.

*SI: NVC is also available in the school system. How does NVC consider the needs of the children and the parents as well as the teachers?*

MR: We show teachers a way of working as a partner to the students, not controlling them but offering them what they, the teachers, see as valuable, and helping the students be actively more involved in their own living. We show them how to create an interdependent student panel where the students see themselves all contributing to each other's work, not seeing themselves competing to get the best grades. When the research in our schools is accepted partnership goes up and violence decreases. However, the problem is how to sustain them. Traditionally, schools function to teach students to be obedient to authority, to work for rewards, to compete with each other. We try to do both: to transform schools together with people in the community.

*SI: To talk about families: how can parents speak about their ‘feelings’ and ‘needs’ without losing their authority, their responsibility for the children?*

MR: It requires our helping parents and teachers to make some critical distinctions in their work. It will really help them to see that NVC is not talking about doing nothing. We show them the difference between respect for authority and fear of authority. When parents say, “You know, I have to punish my children in order to maintain my authority”, do they mean respect or fear? I might say, “For example, if you will leave this meeting today – perhaps you will have respect for my authority, it'll be because you have seen me doing some things that are valuable, and I offered them to you. So, for you to do things out of respect, you need to see me, offering something valuable and not imposing it.”

I also ask the parents if they want the child to have self-discipline or obedience. Self-discipline requires people to do things willingly because they see how it enriches life. Obedience is what people do to avoid punishment, get a reward – radically different things. We might have to use force – but protective use of force, not for punish-

ment. When young children run in the street, we may stop them – not to punish them but to protect them.

*SI: Is NVC also useful for people with depression?*

MR: Over the years I met many people who have been diagnosed with a ‘depressive disorder’ by professionals. My approach suggests that the labels that imply this person has an illness contribute to the problem because it makes people think there’s some-



photo: Etan J. Tai / wikimedia.org

Dr Marshall Rosenberg PhD, 1990

thing wrong with them. When I work with somebody who tells me they are depressed, I usually ask them this question: “What needs of yours are not being met?” But they don’t know how to answer this question. “I will tell you – I’m a terrible mother....” We help people to identify how they are talking to themselves and what makes them depressed and then we help them to transform that into a language of life.

*SI: To express what is alive in oneself in terms of ‘feelings’ and ‘needs’ requires a kind of inner awareness of what is really happening within oneself. So, is there a spiritual dimension to NVC?*

MR: Yes, exactly! NVC is all about a lan-

guage that helps us to do what comes naturally for us, which is compassionate giving. There is a spiritual belief that as human beings we enjoy more than anything else contributing to one another’s well-being. And I believe that that is so because we are created out of a divine energy, and this energy which is life, thrives on enriching life. So that’s a unique spirituality. I was working in a city of Palestinian authority and at the end of the day a young man said: “Marshall, this is a wonderful training, it will be very helpful. You know this is just “applied Islam”. I replied smilingly: “Just yesterday I was in Jerusalem and the orthodox Rabbi told me that it is “applied Judaism” and we have a priest, working in our project in Sri Lanka who tells me, it’s “applied Christianity”. We have Hindus and Buddhists who tell us the same. The idea of compassionate giving – what we are all about – is not a new concept. What people might learn from these different religions in our training is that it shows people how to manifest that in their lives.

*SI: Empathic listening is part of your concept. How can one integrate this more in the process of communication?*

MR: To me empathy is to connect with the life-energy within another person – what is alive in this person at this moment. And since I believe that this life-energy is divine energy – then empathic connection is to connect with the divine energy coming through this person in this moment. But very often this energy might be expressed by the other person by screaming, “you are the most selfish person....” Our training suggests that all the messages you can receive from other people are coming from the life within that person. And if we can connect to this we will experience something divine coming through this person.

*SI: Would it be possible to offer empathy to someone who has badly hurt me?*

MR: Before I could do that, very often I may need empathy myself. I may need somebody to fully understand the suffering I have gone through as a result of what this person has done. If I can get the empathy that I need for my suffering then I am much better able to see what was going on in the other person. This is how I contribute our training to the idea of ‘restorative justice’. I was working in a prison with a man who had raped a woman and we were in the room together and I helped him to connect with her in-

tense suffering. Maybe the rape happened years ago, but she is still having nightmares about it, so she expresses that pain. This is very hard for many people to trust, or even imagine, because we’ve been educated in cultures that contribute to justice and punishment. It’s not easy for other people to accept that prisoners are human beings in this kind of dialogue with their victim.

*SI: Can NVC also be used in political and social conflicts?*

MR: I’m not infrequently called upon to mediate in social conflicts. I mediated between tribes in Africa that were at war, killing each other. I have been called to some governments to show the politicians how this method can be applied on a political level. I also worked with the Foreign Service Department in Israel.

*SI: To take an example of a really serious world problem – like the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: how can NVC tackle such a big problem?*

MR: First of all, I tried to identify people from both the Palestinian and the Israeli area that share the spirituality of our process – so it services their spiritual beliefs and they saw it as a valuable contribution to peace. I went to both areas, introduced the process to a wide range of people and then selected a team from both sides, in order to train them intensively so that they could offer the training in that region. Some years ago, I brought Israelis and Palestinians to Switzerland, training them together. They told me, “You know Marshall, from our history, from this place, this did not start yesterday, this pain has been going on a long time. We believe if we could get it to the next generation of students, we could educate them in a different way, to see things differently ...” Both the Israelis and the Palestinians I was working with set out to find ways to get this into schools and they have been successful. They arranged for me to work in the refugee camps – they have a lot of tensions there. We work with physicians, the police, members of the army in Israel. We have reached a wide range of people in Israel and Palestine. We haven’t stopped the war – but we are getting closer and closer to having our training known at the top-level and having powerful advocates, so that they use the kind of mediation that we suggest, rather than the usual sort of ‘peace talks’.

For more information: [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)