



Peace Review

A Journal of Social Justice

ISSN: 1040-2659 (Print) 1469-9982 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cper20>

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To cite this article: Joseph Besigye Bazirake & Gitta Zimmermann (2018) Peace Profile: Marshall Rosenberg, *Peace Review*, 30:2, 246-253, DOI: [10.1080/10402659.2018.1458970](https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2018.1458970)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2018.1458970>



Published online: 31 May 2018.



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Peace Profile: Marshall Rosenberg

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Seldom does one find a communication approach for nurturing peaceful relations that is also seamlessly packaged with teachable skills. Such is the global legacy that the work of Dr. Marshall Rosenberg (1934–2015) has achieved through his creation and teaching of the methods of Nonviolent Communication (NVC). NVC, which is sometimes called “compassionate communication,” the “language of life,” or “giraffe language,” offers the kind of resourcefulness required for self-expression in a way that supports empathy both for oneself and for others.

Marshall, as he is fondly referred to by those who are familiar with his work, described NVC as a process of becoming aware of “what is alive in us” in the present moment. This practical element that renders NVC usable in the “here and now” is credited with enabling it to transcend religious, cultural, and language boundaries around the world. As such, NVC is premised on the postulation that when our ways of communication support compassionate giving and receiving, then happiness replaces violence and grieving. Therefore, beyond using NVC as a strategy for effective communication, within its underlying ethos of compassion, it can also function as a sought-after value system for nurturing familial relations, in reinvigorating education strategies, and in the mediation of conflict, among a multiplicity of other applications.

In the following, the authors share from their personal experiences with Marshall’s NVC work, both as individuals engaged in continuous learning, and as facilitators of NVC training projects. The peace profile will thus be divided into two parts: the first part will explore some key aspects about Marshall’s life leading to the development of NVC, while the second part will explore the key components of NVC, with illustrations of its application.

In his seminal book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, Marshall reveals his journey toward the development of the NVC process. Here, he discloses that one of the key experiences that was to later have a profound effect on his ideas about human nature was to be found in an

“Every message, regardless of form or content, is an expression of a need.”—M. B. Rosenberg

anecdote from his childhood when his family relocated to Detroit around the same time that the race riots were at their height in the 1940s. Having been identified as Jewish, Marshall became a target for bullying in school and within his neighborhood, prompting him to realize that the nature of the world was such that difference could become a precipitator for violence.

Based on this childhood exposure to a context of community-wide violence in Detroit, Marshall's observation of what he called "two different kinds of smiles" made major impressions on his boyhood self. On the one hand, he observed that the onlookers along the streets smiled when he was being hurt and humiliated for being a Jew; and, on the other hand, he observed that his uncle also smiled while he nursed Marshall's terminally ill grandmother. In an interview with Sarah van Gelder of *YES Magazine*, Marshall alluded to his interpretation of the two smiles as having led him to wonder how some people were able to enjoy contributing to other people's wellbeing (as observed from his uncle's smile), while others seemed to enjoy the suffering of other people (as observed in the smiles of the onlookers, who watched him being bullied).

As such, Marshall attributes the development of his NVC work to numerous life experiences, academic endeavors, and key acquaintances who influenced his outlook. For instance, earning his doctoral degree in psychology from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1961 had a contradictory effect on him by arousing his apprehensiveness toward the pathological focus of the psychology field. When he later veered into an independent study of comparative religion, the work of the theologian, Walter Wink, and his critical argument that violence was a result of the kind of thinking that saw human beings as innately evil, became integral to Marshall's own understanding of the nature of violence.

Marshall was to later uphold the argument that the pervasiveness of violence was intricately embedded in the social infrastructure of the majority of cultural communities around the world. His eventual thesis, which also became part of the grounding for his work on NVC, was that in their true nature, human beings enjoy contributing to each other's wellbeing. He maintained, however, that the prevalence of domination structures that perpetuate violence were still deeply rooted in the education system spanning over several thousands of years.

As a consequence of his diverse learning, Marshall did not only define violence in terms of people's attempts to hurt one another, but quite crucially also, as any use of force aimed at coercion. According to this premise, violence is what results when those with power use force as a domineering tool. His endorsement for nonviolence was then to follow after Gandhi's philosophy of *Satyagraha*, which, as a derivative of the Indian ideal of *Ahimsa*, speaks to the absence of violence from the heart. Nonetheless,

Marshall underscored the conditional necessity of the use of force, only as a means for protection. In what he dubbed as the “protective use of force,” Marshall distinguished between violence and the use of force, by demonstrating that it was possible, and sometimes necessary, to apply force without being violent per se.

Among the key personalities who shaped Marshall’s ideas was the Chilean economist, Manfred Max Neef, from whose work an expandable list of needs was developed as a grounding component of NVC. Marshall’s work was further influenced by his scholarly acquaintance with Carl Rogers, whose work in human-centered approaches and whose supervision of Marshall’s research at the University of Wisconsin–Madison strongly influenced the way empathy is understood in NVC.

Given this abridged background of Marshall and the development of NVC, the rest of this peace profile will pay specific attention to the components of NVC and illustrate its application. NVC is symbolically represented by a giraffe (hence the name, “giraffe language”) to encompass, in a physical metaphor, the attributes of the ethos of the NVC process. The giraffe possesses a large heart (as the NVC symbol for empathy), and a long neck that sticks out (as a symbol for vulnerability, but also for the ability to see far beyond the immediate surroundings). As a process, NVC’s stated aim is to help people to be able to connect with themselves and with each other in a way that makes “natural giving” possible. This state of natural giving (or giving from the heart, as it is sometimes described) arises when an act of service is neither done out of a sense of duty or obligation, nor is it driven from the fear of punishment or from a motivation for rewards. Rather, it is a choice marked by the full awareness of the individual—of their own needs, and of the needs of the other. The imagery of a child feeding a hungry duck has often been used to illustrate the scenario that arises from the mutual benefits of giving and receiving: where the hungry duck gobbles up the food being offered much to the astounding delight of the child.

On the other end of the spectrum, standing at odds with the quality of natural giving, is what Marshall described as the tragic game of “who’s right?” in which rewards and punishment are the currencies at play. This is metaphorically referred to as “jackal language” (with the jackal as a metaphor for the language that trades in blame, guilt, and shame). Jackal language is characteristically built around binary forms of rationalization in terms of right or wrong, good or bad, and normal or abnormal among others.

The process of NVC therefore strives to create the kind of space where people have an increased awareness of their own actions/inactions by focusing attention on meeting needs. This way of attention is expected to create space for empathy, interdependence, and choice. As such, NVC operates within a “power-with” paradigm, where respect for authority also

pays attention to responsibility, and where every human being is recognized as having needs. This approach is different from the “power-over” model that exists in domination systems, in which the fear of authority is promoted through a focus on the power to punish or reward, and where those with power use it to control or steer other people’s behaviors. One classic example made by Marshall to demonstrate a denial of responsibility within the jackal language is the trial of Nazi lieutenant, Adolf Eichmann, in which he consistently attributed his involvement in the atrocities of the Jewish Holocaust to a performance of the duties expected of his job.

To illustrate the application of NVC and describe its components, a hypothetical scenario that involves a domestic exchange between a parent and their teenage daughter will now be presented as a working example:

Parent: I don’t like it when you always come back home late.

Teenage daughter: But I told you that I will be going over with my friends for our band practice after school!

Parent: Don’t you know how dangerous it is for a bunch of girls to be out on their own, late in the night?

Teenage daughter: We are careful. Nothing will happen to any of us.

Parent: Careful? Listen here young lady: I don’t want you to come to this house late anymore!

Teenage daughter: But you never listen to me! (She storms out of the room, crying, while the parent is left behind, boiling with fury.)

This hypothetical conversation will be revisited in the discussions that follow, to provide a step by step breakdown of how it could have been handled differently in the event that the parent would have been able to apply NVC.

The first step in the NVC process is to make an observation. An observation is a way of bringing awareness to what one sees or hears without attaching any evaluations to it. In the case of our scenario, the conversation could have opened with an observation, as an actual reference to the time and frequency of the behavior that the parent had observed as such: “When I see you coming home after 10 pm for three nights in the same week . . .” Making observations in this way, without tainting them with evaluations is what was lauded by Jiddu Krishnamurti as “The highest form of human intelligence.”

The second NVC step involves an expression of the feelings arising from a particular observation. Feelings are not to be confused with mental

evaluations, thoughts, or judgments about a given situation, but rather can be simply understood as natural sensations that are triggered by an observation. In our hypothetical scenario, the parent's feelings could be anything ranging from concern, fear, confusion, or even disappointment. Here, the parent could express themselves as such: "When I see you coming home after 10 pm for three nights in the same week, I feel *concerned* and *worried* . . ." It is important to note that feelings are the speaker's own sensations that are triggered by the observation, and not one's judgment of what is going on or what "wrong" another person has done. It is not uncommon for people to erroneously express their feelings by way of laying blame on other people as a source of their feelings or as a form of analysis of a situation. The emphasis on the expression of feelings from the "self" in the NVC approach, is to stress the connection between one's feelings and needs as an internal process for every individual. Therefore, rather than saying "I feel . . . because you did . . ." the expression, "I feel . . . because I need . . ." is used.

This brings us to the "need" as the third step of NVC, to which feelings draw attention. It is thus argued in NVC processes that feelings are akin to a dashboard, whose purpose is to point toward needs that have either been met or remain unmet. In our earlier scenario, one could guess, for instance, that the parent might have had a need for understanding and safety. In that case, the parent could then have expressed themselves as such: "When I see you coming home after 10 pm for three nights in the same week, I feel concerned and worried because I need some understanding of what's going on and I am longing for safety."

At this point, in order to ensure clarity and that one's needs are fully heard by the other person(s), the fourth and final NVC step of making requests serves this purpose. On the one hand, a request may be made to check if there is a shared understanding of what someone intended to communicate. This kind of request, "a connection request" as it is called, seeks to establish whether the parties involved agree on the observations, and have heard the expressed feelings and needs, before proceeding to find solutions. In our example, the connection request could be added as such: "When I see you coming home after 10 pm for three nights in the same week, I feel concerned and worried because I need the assurance for safety and would like to understand what's going on. Would you be willing to tell me how you feel about what I just said?"

After establishing the required connection with the other party, a more solution-oriented request can then be made. Here, a careful distinction between a request and a demand ought to be made, where a request acknowledges the space for one to choose to meet (or not), what is requested of them while a demand would seek to coerce someone into a particular response. Nonetheless, a clear request needs to be framed in positive and achievable

(doable) terms (e.g., the actions that one would like to be done, rather than what one does not want). In our earlier scenario, the parent's final request to meet their need for understanding and their longing for safety could be expressed as: "Would you be willing to let me know how you spent time this evening, and how you were able to return home?"

There is obviously no text-book format for how a conversation of this kind, between a parent and the teenage daughter, could have played out, but even in the event that only one party (the parent in this case) might have been able to use NVC, we would likely have had a different flow to it. The encounter is thus alternatively reproduced as such:

Parent: When I see you coming home after 10 pm for three nights in the same week, I feel concerned and worried because I need the assurance for safety and would like to understand what's going on. Would you be willing to tell me how you feel about what I just said?

Teenage daughter: *I am hearing that I cannot be trusted when I stay out with my friends.*

Parent: Well, thank you for telling me what you heard. I would like to be heard differently. I am concerned and worried about your safety and would like to know how you take care of that when you stay out with your friends. Would you be willing to let me know how you spent time this evening, and how you were able to return home?

Teenage daughter: *Well, three of us met at Cynthia's house after school to practice for our new band. After practice, Cynthia's mother dropped me off.*

Parent: Oh, and would you then let me know on the days when you are practicing so that I have clarity? Are you willing to give me Cynthia's mom's phone number, in case I want to contact you on the days that you practice?

Teenage daughter: Certainly; here it is. Also, the girls asked me to check with you if we can sometimes practice here, and so that you can drop them off as well?

Parent: *(gasps for breath...)*

Just like Marshall pointed out, and it has been our experience, the process of learning NVC is much like learning a new language. This is because NVC taps into a depth of compassion that involves a connection with feelings and needs (through empathy), and sometimes, this process is accomplished without words (that is silent empathy). As such, a number of resources have been developed, primarily by Marshall and a number of other trainers over the years, to support individuals involved in learning and teaching NVC. Apart

from the teaching resource books, additional tools for teaching and learning include puppetry, empathy cards, as well as numerous games and role-plays. The pedagogical diversity in NVC trainings results into sessions that blend learning, creativity, and experimenting with real-world scenarios, that in turn create a shared learning environment for both trainers and participants alike.

NVC has, however, been subject to some criticisms over the years, especially in regard to some of its robust propositions. Some criticism has been laid towards the practicability of the assertion that one does not have to hear any insults directed at them, but rather, that even such insults can be understood differently when they are received as expressions of the feelings and unmet needs of their author through the use of NUC. The other claim is that one should never hear NO, and that one can be able to connect with the YES underneath every NO when using NVC. In other words, everybody who says NO to a request is saying YES to something else other than what is requested of them. On the surface, claims such as these might sound wishy-washy until one taps into NVC's deeper philosophical resonance from which they are derived.

To emphasize this depth, Marshall expressed confidence that everything people communicate among each other always translates into only one of two things: "please" and "thank you." According to this logic, every piece of communication that relates to an unmet need would translate into "please," implying its implicit request to meet certain needs. On the other hand, people say "thank you" when they are celebrating needs that have been met. Marshall often mourned about how infrequently people expressed meaningful gratitude, and yet he considered gratitude as an energy boost or: "giraffe juice," to use a phrase that he coined. If one is to summarize the role of NVC based on the elaboration thus far, it would be twofold: first, to enable people to express their needs in ways that are more likely to be heard, and thus have the best chance of being met; and second, to enable people to express gratitude in ways that would further enrich their sense of contributing to each other's experience of life.

The commitment to an enduring legacy of NVC that started with the work of Marshall Rosenberg is in part exemplified by the creation of the Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC) as an international organization that has now been followed by a number of additional training programs and projects by numerous trainers around the world. At CNVC, where Marshall remained the director of Educational Services until his death in 2015, the focus has been kept on maintaining the integrity of the NVC process as exemplified by the mentorship-based trainer certification process and the periodic 9-day intensive training workshops that are conducted in various parts of the world.

Marshall bore a dream to see NVC penetrating into schools and families as key entry points to whole communities. His dream of having what

he called “giraffe schools” around the world remains part of a growing vision that strives to provide for the education of a generation of young people in ways of NVC: supporting interdependence rather than competition and standing against the use of punishment and rewards to manipulate behavior. This dream—to have a critical mass of people who can be re-educated to see to it that everyone’s needs can be met compassionately—is kept afloat by the hundreds of NVC certified trainers, volunteers, and supporters of NVC who continually strive to share its principles around the world.

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