

# EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY

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## NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION: A LANGUAGE OF LIFE (2ND EDITION)

MARSHALL B. ROSENBERG, PH.D.

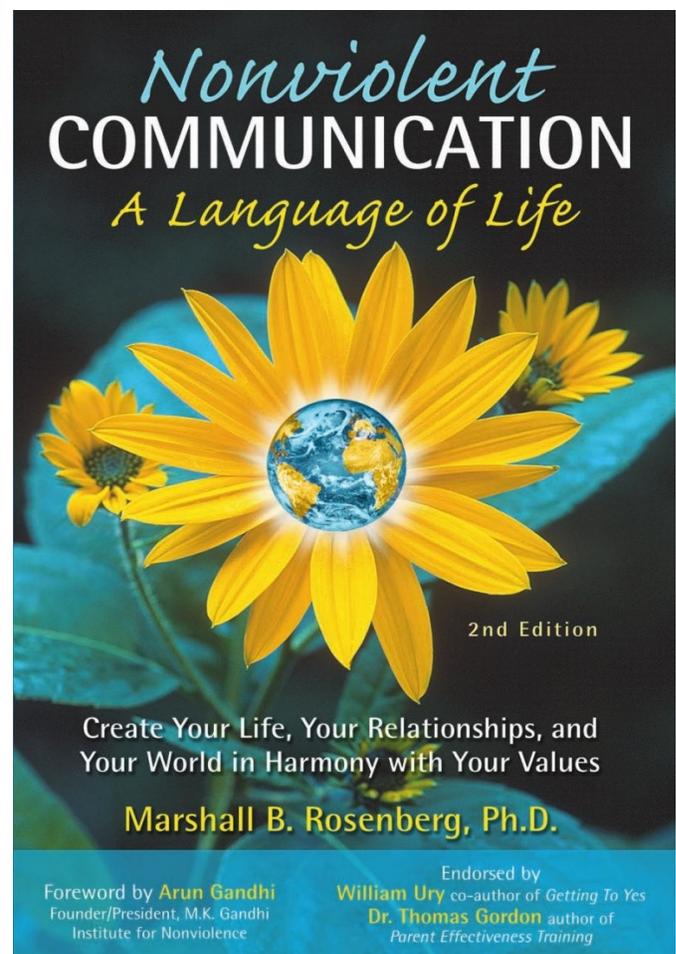
Consider how vital relationships are to your life. Then consider how vital good communication is to keeping those relationships healthy and strong; and how easily bad communication can disrupt or even destroy the strength of those relationships.

Now imagine if there was a simple set of tools that anyone could apply to their own communication style that could prevent communication from going wrong, and promote harmony in the most strained and difficult relationships. Can you imagine the impact such a set of tools might have not only on your own life, but the lives of those around you?

If that sounds worth learning about, then you're ready to start reading Dr. Marshall Rosenberg's world-changing classic, *Nonviolent Communication*.

(For my full review, see page 9.)

- Tony Hallett, reviewer



## ENDORSEMENTS FOR THE BOOK:

"Nonviolent Communication can change the world. More importantly, it can change your life. I cannot recommend it highly enough."  
Jack Canfield, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series

"Nonviolent Communication is a simple yet powerful methodology for communicating in a way that meets both parties needs. This is one of the most useful books you will ever read."

William Ury, coauthor of *Getting to Yes*.

## CHAPTER 1: GIVING FROM THE HEART

In Nonviolent Communication (abbreviated “NVC”), the term “nonviolent” is used in the sense described by Mahatma Gandhi: a reference to our natural state of compassion when violence has subsided from the heart (p. 2). In fact, the essence of NVC is to practice language and communication skills that foster rather than disrupt empathic connection between people, especially when conflict or difficult emotions may be present. By enhancing empathy rather than destroying it with judgments, criticisms, or unwanted demands, we can build

compassionate lives; develop healthier personal and professional relationships; improve schools, communities and other organizations; and even help resolve global-level conflicts. NVC enables us to remain vulnerable without jeopardizing our emotional safety and assertive without provoking defensiveness in others. It is, at its core, a way of focusing our attention intensely on the usually unheard message behind people’s words and behaviours so that we can offer them



Communication becomes an act of giving.

understanding and open the door towards both parties feeling their lives enriched by the encounter.

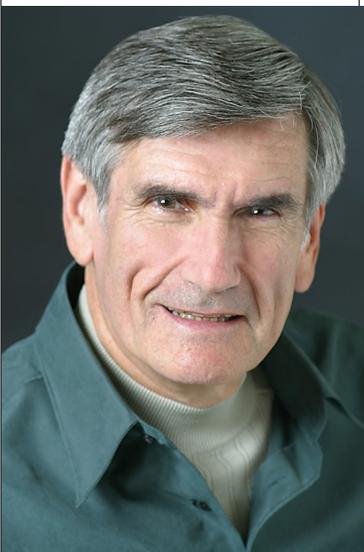
*“NVC helps us connect with each other and ourselves in a way that allows our natural compassion to flourish” (p. 12).*

## THE 4 COMPONENTS OF NVC

The NVC process has four components:

1. Observation of actions that affect one’s well being
2. Expressing the feelings related to what was observed
3. Identifying the need(s) or value(s) giving rise to those feelings
4. Asking for specific actions from others that would meet those needs.

These components can either be received by listening empathically to another human being, or can be given to another through self-expression. The beauty of NVC then, is that it can be used whether the other party uses it or not, or events aware of it.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

(source: <https://www.cnvc.org/about/marshall-rosenberg.html>)

Growing up in an inner-city Detroit neighborhood Dr. Marshall Rosenberg was confronted daily with various forms of violence. Wanting to explore the causes of violence and what could be done to reduce violence, he chose to study clinical psychology and received his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Wisconsin in 1961. In 1966 he was

awarded diplomat status in clinical psychology from the American Board of Examiners in Professional Psychology.

Nonviolent Communication training evolved from Dr. Rosenberg’s quest to find a way of rapidly disseminating much needed peacemaking skills. The Center for Nonviolent Communication emerged out of work he was doing with civil rights activists in the

early 1960’s. During this period he also mediated between rioting students and college administrators and worked to peacefully desegregate public schools in long-segregated regions.

Dr. Rosenberg passed peacefully at home, with his wife Valentina and all his children by his side on February 7th, 2015.

## CHAPTER 2: COMMUNICATION THAT BLOCKS COMPASSION

NVC facilitates communication with others (and our self) that allows the natural giving and receiving of compassion to take place, contrary to what much of our social conditioning encourages. Blames, insults, put-downs, labels, criticism, comparisons, and diagnoses are all forms of judgment. When we communicate these either verbally or non-verbally to others, we engage in what Rosenberg calls “life-alienating” communication (p. 15), and we foster a climate tending towards violence rather than compassion.

Additionally, even the common practices of analyzing others or comparing people to yourself or each other leads to this impersonal mode of interaction that keeps us from discovering what is truly going on in others and in ourselves. NVC teaches us to avoid these ways of evaluating the actions or values of others. To be true to NVC, we avoid moralistic judgments of all kinds, and must also fully take responsibility for our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours so as to avoid blaming others. For example, saying “He makes me so angry!” cannot



Arguments are usually examples of “life-alienating” communication.

be true, because it blames another for one’s own response to an external stimulus (even though the stimulus may in fact be unpleasant).

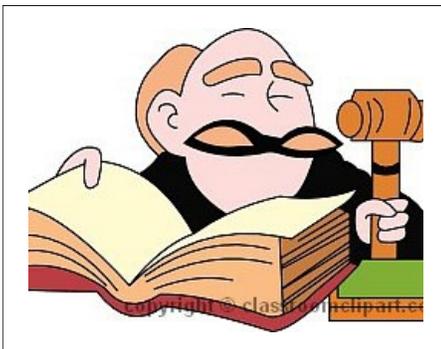
*“We can replace language that implies lack of choice with language that acknowledges choice” (p. 21).*

## CHAPTER 3: OBSERVING WITHOUT EVALUATING

The first component of NVC, as previously introduced, is the observation of concrete actions. This seems simple enough, but it is surprising how naturally we add evaluations to our observations: “That’s a lousy paint job!”

The Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti once remarked that observing without evaluating is the highest form of

human intelligence (p. 28). NVC focusses our powers of observation on things we are seeing, hearing, or touching that are affecting our sense of well-being. It requires that we keep any evaluations separate from this act of observing. Because it seems to be second nature to mix evaluation in with our observations, the author provides a handy table of examples (p. 30)



Judging and evaluating effectively block compassion.

contrasting observations that are separate from evaluations vs. observations that have evaluations mixed in. “You are too generous,” is an example of an observation with evaluation mixed in; “When I see you giving all your lunch money to others, I think you are being too generous,”

is an example of an observation separate from an evaluation.

Observations that are less likely to provoke defensiveness are those that are specific to time and context, such as, “The last 3 times I initiated an activity, you said you didn’t want to do it.” Contrast this with, “You never do what I want.”

An exercise provided at the end of the chapter gives the reader a chance to test and solidify his or her understanding of the material, as the author provides clear reasons for the answers to each question. Interestingly, rather than identifying right or wrong answers, Rosenberg simply explains why he agrees or disagrees with the different options.

## CHAPTER 4: IDENTIFYING AND EXPRESSING FEELINGS

We all have difficulty at times putting our true feelings into words accurately, especially men or those whose upbringing or professional training discouraged the expression of emotion. But learning to do so is essential for mastering NVC, whose second main component is “to express how we are feeling” and, corre-



*“Judgments of others are alienated expressions of our own unmet needs” (p. 52).*

spondingly, to help others discover what they might be feeling.

It is common to confuse feelings with thoughts or opinions: “I feel like your music is too loud,” or, “I feel inadequate” reflect thought processes and judgments, not actual emotions. Similarly, many feeling-type words actually reveal our thoughts about others: “I feel judged,” for example. True feelings seldom require the use of the word “feel” at all. Finally, Rosenberg discourages the use of vague expressions of feeling, such as, “I’m feeling good

about this,” preferring that an actual emotion be identified (e.g. “I’m relieved by this sudden change of events”).

Two long lists are provided with examples of words for how we feel when our needs are being met, and for when our needs are not being met. For example, “amazed”, “confident”, “free”, “hopeful”, and “thankful”, vs. “afraid”, “chagrined”, “edgy”, “jittery”, and, “reluctant”. An exercise at the end of the chapter tests whether the reader can successfully distinguish between genuine expressions of feeling versus expressions of thought, opinion, or vague generalizations.

## CHAPTER 5: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR FEELINGS

The third component of NVC is acknowledging the inner need that, when frustrated or satisfied, gives rise to our feelings. Too often we blame circumstances or others for our feelings, or conversely, accept responsibility for other people’s feelings. NVC, on the contrary, reminds us that circumstances or other people may be the stimulus for our feelings, but not the cause—the cause being our response to the stimulus (i.e. our interpretation of it). For example, by interpreting criticism as an attack against my worth as a human being, I may feel hurt and angry. On the other hand, by interpreting that same criticism as a cry for help from a frustrated,

limited human being, I may feel compassionate.

Rather than airing feelings out with judgment-laden or demanding statements (that often point out the wrongs of other people), Rosenberg has found that when people begin to discuss the needs behind their feelings, the chances of everyone getting their needs met goes up dramatically. As an aid to those of us not used to identifying our own needs (or the legitimate needs of others), he lists a number of genuine human needs under 7 main categories: autonomy, celebration, integrity, interdependence, play, spiritual

communion, and physical nurturance.

Some people need to go through a progression to arrive at a place called “Emotional Liberty,” in which we take full responsibility for our own actions and feelings, not those of others), so we are able to respond compassionately to others rather than respond out of fear, guilt, or shame. Sometimes, after becoming aware of our own emotional needs, people pass through an “obnoxious” phase when they no longer want to be responsible for the feelings of others, and may react angrily when tempted to do so.

## CHAPTER 6: REQUESTING THAT WHICH WOULD ENRICH LIFE

Whenever we say something to another person, we are invariably seeking something: either an empathic (possibly nonverbal) connection; an honest reaction to what we've said; or a request that they would do something to help meet our needs.

Because NVC is at root non-coercive, it must include a component that allows communication of needs to others in a way that is not manipulative or demanding, but invites cooperation. This is the fourth component of NVC: stating what we desire in clear, unambiguous terms that describe some specific, positive action that is being requested so that others can choose

freely to respond. In so doing, we must remain clear that our primary objective in making such a request is to build relationship based on honesty and empathy—not to make the other person do what we want.

Sometimes this needs to include taking responsibility to determine whether others have actually understood what was intended. We can ask listeners to reflect back to us what they heard us say. If misunderstanding has taken place, we can use NVC and say, "I feel grateful that you told me what you heard me say. Would you be willing to let me try to explain myself more clearly?"

There may be times when, no matter how carefully we word our requests, that listeners may interpret it as demanding. Rosenberg advises that in those cases it is best to empathize with the hearer's refusal—after all, if it truly was a request and not a demand, then there will be no need to feel upset when the request is denied.

Communicating inner needs in vague, indirect, or demanding ways is a common cause of frustration in relationships. Similarly, depression can result from a failure to express needs to others.

*"As we've seen, all criticism, attack, insults, and judgments vanish when we focus attention on hearing the feelings and needs behind a message. The more we practice in this way, the more we realize a simple truth: behind all those messes we've allowed ourselves to be intimidated by are just individuals with unmet needs appealing to us to contribute to their well-being" (p. 99).*

## CHAPTER 7: RECEIVING EMPATHICALLY

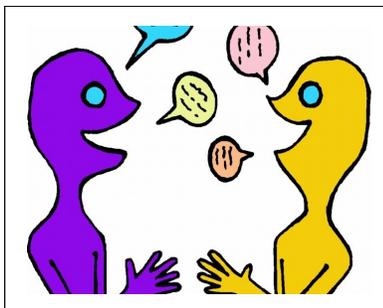
The previous four chapters outlined the four components of NVC: what we are observing, feeling, and needing, and what we would like from others. In those chapters the focus was on initiating exchanges with others (i.e. using NVC to communicate my observations, feelings, and needs to others). This chapter focuses on using NVC to respond to others. That is, how to listen for and respond to the observations, feelings, and needs of others.

When people are in pain or distress, it is tempting to try to deflect their anger, try to "fix" the problem for them; however, this prevents us from being "present" and connecting with them empathetically. This way we can listen for what people are needing,

rather than reacting to their thoughts. It may be helpful to reflect back a sense of any or all of the four components of NVC by paraphrasing and asking for clarification. For example the question, "Are you feeling hurt because you would like more appreciation of your efforts than you received tonight?" could be an empathic way of responding to a co-worker's rudeness.

Often times when we can connect empathically with others, we find that their initial statement is just the tip of an emotional iceberg, so it is important to stick with empathy until they are noticeably relieved. At that point, working towards solutions can begin. At other times, our own emotional pain may hinder our ability

to respond empathically to others. In those cases we can use empathy on our own internal dialogue, give ourselves some time, or even "scream nonviolently." Screaming nonviolently is NVC's way of yelling without frightening or attempting to control others, so can only be used in a setting where others will not respond *negatively*.



An empathic conversation is joyful and liberating.

## CHAPTER 8: THE POWER OF EMPATHY

Several pointed examples of the simple use of empathic listening to bring about change, trust, and healing.

This chapter is largely a collection of examples illustrating how the skilled use of NVC has led to dramatic changes in real-life situations, in schools, among street gangs, in highly dangerous and volatile situations, in personally

embarrassing situations, and cases of severe mental trauma. In each example there was marked change and progress toward goals that had previously seemed impossible.

If you don't have time to read the whole book, just read this chapter. After reading it, my guess is you'll want to re-evaluate whether reading the

whole book would be worth your time!

My favorite quote from this chapter is:

"Time and time again, people transcend the paralyzing effects of psychological pain when they have sufficient contact with someone who can hear them empathically" (p. 127).

*"When we are internally violent towards ourselves, it is difficult to be genuinely compassionate toward others" (p. 129).*

## CHAPTER 9: CONNECTING COMPASSIONATELY WITH OURSELVES

In this chapter Rosenberg addresses the universal human problem of guilt and shame. He shows how NVC can be applied to one's own inner processes to gain relief from the burden that all psychoanalytic and humanistic schools of thought (under which Rosenberg was trained) have wrestled with. While some of the advice is no doubt useful and even needed, his underlying reasoning appears to rest on a faulty premise.

Departing from conventional wisdom (and perhaps sound psychology), Rosenberg here claims that "We were not meant to succumb to the needs and dictates of *should* and *have to*, whether they come from outside or inside of ourselves (p. 131). He identifies *should* as a "violent" word (p. 131). Rosenberg claims that regret occurs when "our behaviours run counter to our own needs and values" (p. 133) as if the needs and values of others (and of society at large) have no bearing (this is itself, of course, a value of Rosenberg's that he is placing on his readers—one of strict individualism—yet his book

makes clear that we "should" value the needs of others). Granted, it is preferable that we engage one another with mutually satisfying gifts of care and compassion, but this cannot be our only resort in human interaction. As a leader and manager, I am all too familiar with the need to make expectations (the *should*'s and *have-to*'s) clear to my employees, and let them know that, as much as their willingness to freely serve is to be fostered and appreciated, that does not negate the need for them to meet the employer's *have-to*'s if they want to stay employed. If Rosenberg has a working alternative to this, it doesn't appear in this volume.

As a telling example, Rosenberg says that one of the faulty reasons people do things is "to satisfy a sense of duty," stating, "I consider this to be the most socially dangerous and personally unfortunate of all the ways we act when we cut off from our needs" (p. 140). Granted, his horror over the wanton disregard for Jewish

lives in Nazi Germany under the influence of *Amtssprache* (p. 19) is warranted. However, he seems to be overlooking the fact that those same Germans were defeated and the death camps liberated by Allied soldiers who were also serving, many of them, out of a "sense of duty" toward their country and their fellow man (and not very likely considering their own needs as they faced German tanks and machine guns). Many less westernized cultures that are more collectivist than individualist regard the sense of duty as the highest of all human virtues and a necessary antidote to our inherent self-centredness. It is a notable weakness of the book that Rosenberg never addresses this potential criticism. Of the many examples he cites resolving conflict the NVC way, the possibility of someone continuing to respond with no regard for the others' concerns never seems to arise, and I couldn't help but wonder if this was because the author had no such examples, or whether in fact he chose to omit them from the text to support his view.

## CHAPTER 10: EXPRESSING ANGER FULLY

Contrary to common approaches to conflict resolution, NVC does not discourage the “full and wholehearted” expression of anger (p. 141).

According to NVC, anger is generated when we respond to unmet needs by judging others as at fault and wanting them punished for it. This feeds violence. Rather, if we focus attention on the needs that are not being met at the time we can proceed productively. The four steps to do this are: (1) Stop and breathe; (2) Let go of judgmental thoughts; (3) Identify unmet needs; (4) Express our feelings, needs, and requests.

Sometimes this will go a lot smoother if we are also able to focus on the other person’s unmet needs and feelings before we ourselves move to step (4). For example, if someone makes a racist remark that angers us, by first using NVC to help them identify their pain and unmet needs, we are more likely to be able to successfully communicate our feelings and unmet needs.

Learning NVC takes time, and nowhere is this more obvious than when dealing with angry people or our own anger. It is important

to carefully and methodically review and rehearse the four components of NVC .



NVC allows for the full expression of anger, but not at the expense of others.

*“When my consciousness is focused on another human being’s feelings and needs, I see the universality of our experience... When we settle our attention on other people’s feelings and needs, we experience our common humanity” (p. 151).*

## CHAPTER 11: THE PROTECTIVE USE OF FORCE

This chapter corrects an important possible misinterpretation of NVC; namely, that by avoiding the use of punitive responses, it lacks any assertive response to misbehavior. Rosenberg reiterates his belief that we are socially conditioned to believe that punitive measures are appropriate and effective. He then argues the contrary, but unfortunately doesn’t ground his argument in any relevant social research, other than acknowledging that there is some debate among parents over the merit of spanking.

However, he helpfully clarifies the issue by requiring that we ask ourselves two questions (p. 165). The first, “What do I want this person to do that is different than what he or she is currently doing?” is likely automatic for most of us when addressing misbehavior. It is the second that

brings the light of NVC to bear on the situation: “What do I want this person’s reasons to be for doing what I’m asking?” This highlights one of the chief underpinnings of NVC: that motives are more important than outcomes, because motives are always tied to our needs, whereas outcomes may not be (????? is this accurate?????)

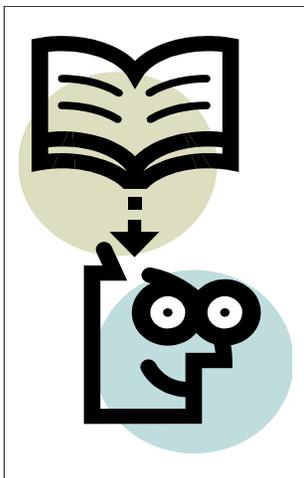
It is a brief chapter, and he mostly supports his view with a brilliant, lengthy anecdote. In an alternative school built on using the principles of NVC, things quickly unraveled as students learned that teachers would neither punish nor otherwise challenge disruptive behaviour. Rosenberg held an emergency meeting with the worst offenders among the students. Using NVC, he engaged the students who, not surprisingly, themselves initially recom-

mended things like corporal punishment or expulsion—the same punitive measures Rosenberg was trying to do away with. Continuing to engage with them, revealing how he felt about using those methods, the students came up with other recommendations, ones that helped address the causes of the misbehaviours in a non-punitive way. Problem solved!

An interesting observation gleaned from the above example is that the staff of the school, who were trained by Rosenberg for four days prior to the doors opening, were unable to successfully implement NVC without the intervention noted above. This does suggest that NVC is not easy to adopt quickly, even for seasoned and educated professionals.

## CHAPTER 12: LIBERATING OURSELVES AND COUNSELING OTHERS

We all have difficulty at times putting our true feelings into words accurately, especially men or those whose upbringing or professional training



Learning and practicing NVC can change your life!

discouraged the expression of emotion. But learning to do so is essential for mastering NVC, whose second main component is “to express how we are feeling” and, correspondingly, to help others discover what they might be feeling.

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vague expressions of feeling, such as, “I’m feeling good about this,” preferring that an actual emotion be identified (e.g. “I’m relieved by this sudden change of events”).

Two long lists are provided with examples of words for how we feel when our needs are being met, and for when our needs are not being met. For example, “amazed”, “confident”, “free”, “hopeful”, and “thankful”, vs. “afraid”, “chagrined”, “edgy”, “jittery”, and, “reluctant”. An exercise at the end of the chapter tests whether the reader can successfully distinguish between genuine expressions of feeling and expressions of thought, opinion, or demands.

*“The ability to bear our own feelings and needs and empathize with them can free us from depression” (p. 173)*

## CHAPTER 13: EXPRESSING APPRECIATION IN NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION

The third component of NVC is acknowledging the inner need that, when frustrated or satisfied, gives rise to our feelings. Too often we blame circumstances or others for our feelings, or conversely, accept responsibility for other people’s feelings. NVC, on the contrary, reminds us that circumstances or other people may be the stimulus for our feelings, but not the cause—the cause being our response to the stimulus (i.e. our interpretation of it). For example, by interpreting criticism as an attack against my worth as a human being, I may feel hurt and angry. On the other hand, by interpreting that same criticism as a cry for help from a frustrated,

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# MY REVIEW OF *NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION*

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EADM 826  
August – September 2016  
University of Saskatchewan  
Prof. Keith Walker & Bob Bayles

This edition was produced  
exclusively for EADM 826!



**Whiteknuckle  
Publishing**

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I was intrigued by the bold promise on the jacket's back cover: "You'll start to resolve conflicts with ease, more easily get what you want without using demands, begin to hear the needs of others with less struggle, strengthen your personal and professional relationships, and start living your fullest potential." Wit the possible exception of the publisher's hyperbole in the latter of those claims, I believe this book has the potential to accomplish not only what it promises, but more.

Every once in a while I come across a book or an idea that seems open up a whole new vista on life—an opportunity to step into a new worldview, for example; a new understanding or a new way of seeing or living. Bruce Alexander's "The Globalization of Addiction" was such a book when I was working as an addictions counsellor. I think Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication* will be such a book for me now in my work as manager of a group home for adolescents.

Although I had learned and even taught some of the principles of NVC before, I have to admit that until actually reading the book, I didn't understand their true essence or fully grasp the critical underlying philosophy. I could express myself more reasonably and became much better at listening to others' points of view and their needs, but I never fully appreciated the philosophy of nonviolence, nor had I fully considered its implications in human relationships. For example as a parent, I still rely on my ability to "nicely" get my kids to do stuff. I have often given my older child the talk that there are some things in life you just "have" to do, all the while watching helplessly as she struggles with depressive thoughts and feelings.

Predictably, I often feel a sense

of elation when I find a book or a resource like this. It's as if I'm on the verge of getting closer to becoming the powerful, effective, more respected leader I've always wanted to be. Over time, however, it eventually dawns on me that the power in what I'm learning will take me lower, not higher! I will be more available to the vulnerable, to the needy—more in touch with hurting people and their pain. It's a sobering realization. After I get over the disappointment, I eventually remember that's what I always wanted anyway. That's what I'm here for. (I think it's what we're all here for, when we remember who we really are.)

As I have tried to make myself a student of the ways of the great teachers of compassion over the years (the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, St. John, St. Paul, Augustine, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Carl Rogers, Viktor Frankl, etc.) I've noticed how deeply embedded are the tendencies to dominate and control in our culture. I have only personally experienced moderate and halting success in even identifying, let alone avoiding, the myriad ways we do this (or fall prey to it) in everyday life. This is the best volume I've come across so far that addresses such a broad range of human interaction with such a simple set of tools.

I tend to think more in terms of "non-coercion" than nonviolent, although I understand the author's use of the word as a reference to Gandhi's work. I continue to struggle with how to fulfill my role as a manager—a role that requires me to be coercive at times—while staying true to the principles of NVC, but I'm planning some concrete steps in the right direction. What helps me is to remember that the principles taught in this book are based on

an ethic of *giving* as opposed to taking a *demanding* posture. It is about giving myself to another wholly (yet not losing myself in the process, as Rosenberg is careful to point out) in the interest of building relationships based on honesty and empathy. (Often our culture facilitates the building of relationships on utility and convenience, both of which tend to alienate people over time.) I believe this is why people find it so freeing to be on the receiving side of NVC. All of us are needy, almost all the time, in one way or another, and we subtly and often subconsciously announce those needs indirectly. We also all are very adept at deflecting demands that are directed at us, especially the indirect ones. The result is a society of people increasingly disconnected and alienated from each other. Meanwhile, NVC stubbornly stands against the current and refuses to let us off the hook so easily.

From the perspective of the book as a learning resource, it serves its intended purpose well. Insight and information in each chapter is bolstered with a number of relevant examples from real life situations. It is obvious that the author has extensive experience using NVC and teaching others to use it as well, as the examples illustrate. Rosenberg also concludes chapters 3 to 7 with self-test quizzes and his own answers to each question, so that readers can assess whether they have accurately grasped the content of the chapter. Because the methods of communicating the NVC way are so contrary to our usual ways of speaking and responding, I personally found the many examples and provided exercises to be very helpful.

I give it two thumbs way up!

Tony Hallett

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