

The Language of Nonviolence

by Sarah van Gelder and Marshall B. Rosenberg

Marshall B. Rosenberg travels the globe teaching Nonviolent Communication to diplomats, educators, corporate managers, parents, military personnel, peace activists, and others in over 20 countries. He has conducted mediation sessions in the Middle East, Sierra Leone, Croatia, and Rwanda. In the following excerpt, he reflects on the language that promotes nonviolence.

When words come from the heart, they break through barriers and elicit compassion. I got interested in this type of communication through pondering two kinds of smiles. My family was the only Jewish family in our Detroit neighborhood, and I was exposed to a considerable amount of violence. The beatings every day on my way home were not pleasant, of

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course, but what bothered me most was that the onlookers would smile and enjoy them.

During each day of my childhood, I also saw another kind of smile. My grandmother was totally paralyzed with Lou Gehrig’s Disease, and my uncle came over to help care for her every day after he finished working. My grandmother was incontinent at that time, so it required cleaning her up. As a boy of eight or nine, I thought it was a horrible job! But I couldn’t wait for the uncle to come because he smiled as though he were getting the greatest pleasure a person could get just by serving my grandmother.

I grew up wondering why it is that some people smile when others are being beaten and other people smile when they’re giving pleasure, even though it might mean doing dirty work.

I got a doctoral degree in psychology, but the training didn’t help me understand very compassionate people like my uncle. So, for about a year I studied comparative theology on my own.

I soon saw that the words “compassion” and “love” were not so much feelings as they were actions. They are ways of serving people with pleasure and getting joy from that service. I think that is part of our nature. I see an awful lot of violence in my work, but I’ve become even more convinced that violence is not our nature.

Three types of language that do not promote understanding

I first got the idea that we always have choices from the psychologist who examined the top Nazi war criminals. What he found was that they were pretty normal, nice people. But I noticed as I was reading through the interviews how often a language was used by these people that denied choice: “should,” “one must,” “have to.” There’s no force on Earth that can make us do anything that we don’t choose to do, though we might not always like the choices that we’re aware of.

The Nazis and others who persecute people, in addition to denying responsibility for their actions, evaluate themselves and others through the use of dehumanizing labels, diagnoses, and interpretations.

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I’m equally concerned about positive diagnoses, by the way. Whether I say you are a nice person or a selfish person, I’m still claiming to know what you are and thereby

alienating myself from the truth about you. I believe that diagnosing and interpreting other people disconnects us from their vulnerability and encourages us to punish them.

A third type of [unhelpful] language is a demand. As I use the term, demands carry a threat of punitive action if not acted upon. I learned about the self-defeating nature of demands when I was a practicing psychologist. I spent many hours talking with children who weren't doing what their parents were requesting. I learned that the kids were receiving those requests as demands. The children would tell me things like, "I don't feel like studying when my parents threaten to take away my allowance." Or, "Would you feel like taking the garbage out if your parents said that you were lazy and irresponsible?"

Language that does promote compassionate understanding

[To promote understanding,] we first ask people to answer the question: "How are you?" The next step is to talk about what could be done to make life more wonderful.

For example, I was asked to work in a village in Nigeria where a quarter of the population had been killed in conflicts between Muslims and Christians that year. I'm in a room with the chiefs of both tribes; my friend had told me earlier there would be at least three people in that room who knew that somebody who killed their child was there with them. So, what do I do? I try to get people's attention focused on those two areas: "How are you? What do you need to make life more wonderful for you?"

If I'm in conflict with people, I try to hear what needs they have. Now, "needs," as we define the term, are universal; all human beings have the same needs. So if I connect to what people are needing, I'm one with them. At the moment that they sense that I am as interested in their needs as in my own, we can find a way to get everybody's needs met. [In my work with the chiefs] one of the key ingredients was to find

out what their needs were that weren't getting met. So I asked both sides, "What are your needs?" And a chief from one of the tribes looks at the other and says, "You people are murderers!" And the other side immediately jumps up and says, "You people have been trying to dominate us for years!"

I believe that such analysis implying wrongness creates violence. In a case like this one, I try to hear how the person is behind their talk. I hear the need that's being expressed, and then I help the other side hear that. Then I keep that flow going back

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and forth. No matter how they communicate, I translate it into how they are and help

each side connect compassionately at that level. Within about two hours, one of the chiefs said, "If we knew how to do this ourselves, we wouldn't have to kill each other."

If I can keep people focused, I have yet to see any conflict that can't be resolved. It's not easy to keep people at that level, but you can keep this process going with anybody regardless of how they're communicating. The important thing is to teach people how to listen for how the other person is, even when that other person doesn't know how to communicate very clearly.

I've seen a rapid change in the last 30 years toward a kind of consciousness that gives me hope. I'm optimistic because everywhere in the world, people are hungry to learn new ways of communication.

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