

# Marshall Rosenberg's Vision of Social Change

With Rachel Lamb

## Remembering

It's been several years since Marshall Rosenberg's death, the much-loved author of **Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life** and founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication. Rosenberg could easily be described as a man who expressed profound radical insights that could significantly change lives. People from around the world continue to discover his work, explore its depths and marvel at how learning NVC, has in fact, changed their lives.

In my own case and like many others, I have only continued to deepen into what it means to be a human being in deep service to life on a planet that exhibits more and more signs that we are living in a troubled time.

In his book **The Heart of Social Change** (which is a transcript of a workshop given in San Diego in 2000), Marshall Rosenberg says two things I wish to explore (bold is mine):

1. *Life-Enriching is the key concept in my paradigm: every action comes out of an image of seeing how human needs would be met by the action. That's the vision that mobilizes everything. A life-enriching organization is one in which all work in the organization, **everything that every worker does, comes out of seeing how it's going to support life in the form of meeting needs—needs of the physical planet, trees, lakes, or human beings or animals—and it's clear how life will be served through meeting of needs. And that's the vision that inspires the actions, purely.***
1. ***It is hard to separate meeting human needs from the needs of the environment: They are one and the same. Meeting the needs of all the phenomena on the planet. Seeing the oneness of it all. Seeing the beauty in that whole scheme, that whole interdependent scheme of Life-enriching structures — the kind of structures that I would like to see us creating and participating in — are structures whose vision is to serve life.***

## Question

I sometimes imagine asking Marshall: *How are we doing Marshall? Do you think we're getting closer to the vision you had in mind?* I may well be wrong but my guess is that Marshall would be discouraged and bewildered by what's happening on our planet. Certainly, I feel discouraged and bewildered .. and I know I'm not alone.

Issues related to climate change and environmental destruction have only become more pressing. Our way of living is deeply exploitative and there is nothing that we have or rely upon (speaking specifically of those of us living in the western dominant culture and consumer society), that does not have exploitation stitched into it. This exploitation is typically hidden from us or appears to us as benign so that we need not be obliged to contend with the consternation and dilemmas that *knowing where our life comes from* would inevitably generate within those of us who have a healthy conscience, which is most. We can reduce, reuse and recycle all we want and we still continue to exploit, our thinking virtually unchanged.

One of the things I so greatly admired about Marshall Rosenberg's talks and trainings was how regularly people's thinking would be changed by virtue of granting attention to the things he spoke. It's relevant to say here that NVC can so easily be framed and understood as a "feeling" modality because of the distinct **care for life** upon which it is founded, and yet I want to note that Rosenberg put a great deal of thought and consideration into what he said and wrote. My sense is that for many people in his audiences, it was the depth, meticulousness, and articulation of his thinking that often touched them on an emotional level. This to me indicates the necessity of deep thought for anyone who wishes to be faithful to what drove Rosenberg to think and speak beyond the confines of the status

quo and have the kind of impact he had.

*Contrary to what some might believe, thinking does not nullify feeling and relatedness .. quite the opposite in fact. A depth of thought concerning human affairs and concerns **deepens** both feeling and relatedness. This was observable and palpable to anyone who had the good fortune of spending time with Marshall.*

Feeling, on its own, is no great achievement .. really it isn't. We are born feeling and sensing. Our survival depends on it. Thinking, however, is labour intensive. Thinking takes time and discipline. Our capacity to skillfully and accurately articulate how we feel rises out of our willingness and ability to discern via our thinking mind while simultaneously receiving input from our senses.

Deep thinking is also an ongoing exercise in humility since a good many of the conclusions we reach about circumstances, encounters, and others are rarely well examined nor are they accurate and yet those ill-conceived conclusions often serve the basis for a wide swath of the decisions we make, many of which go against our deeper human nature and what it means to serve life.

It only takes one look at the bibliography of Rosenberg's book to recognize the depth and breadth of Rosenberg's inquiring and penetrating mind. The extensive list of scholars and their written works is evidence that he did not come to his findings about communication and violence on the basis of intuition or happenstance, but rather on the basis of sustained observation and dedicated research into the exhaustive subject of the human condition.

When I read and reflect on the passages highlighted from Marshall's social change book, I wonder the following: What leads human beings in our part of the world to habitually place **human needs** in the centre of most conversations? What makes us humans so damned important? What about the "needs of the physical planet, trees, lakes, or human beings or animals"? *When was the last time you or someone you know had a conversation with the aliveness of the non-human world in order to learn what was needed there and then proceeded accordingly?*

## Our Work

Our current environmental crisis stems directly from our *NOT* being in connection and conversation with the very real and alive natural world. It comes from *NOT* meeting the needs of all the phenomena on the planet. It comes from *NOT* seeing the oneness of it all. It comes from *NOT* seeing the beauty in that whole scheme, that whole interdependent scheme of life. It comes from *NOT* doing the very things Marshall Rosenberg speaks of. And it comes from *NOT* wanting to know the degree to which we craft our own separateness from the living world and continue to do so at our peril.

From what I have seen and learned from my nearly 20 years of teaching Nonviolent Communication, the emphasis on human needs easily distorts our vision and distracts us from deeper issues. The focus on **my needs** and **your needs** requires virtually no inquiry or awareness whatsoever on what **life requires** in order to keep going, nor does it question whether our very manner of living might be chipping away at our capacity to be human. The focus on personal needs, in fact amplifies the lack of awareness and makes us increasingly self-absorbed and human-centric.

*When you tell me you need empathy after I ask you what prevented you from following through on the commitment you made to prepare dinner for the children, I feel frustrated because I need trust and reliability. Can you tell me what you're hearing me say?*

Some version of this conversation happens in a good many households .. a conversation that exposes the deep cultural poverty that has befallen us, so much so that the responsibilities that come with being an adult and custodian of life have become optional as our societies become increasingly adolescent. What if we were to begin in earnest to speak a **language of life**?

Surely we wouldn't enthrone our needs for comfort, freedom, and independence in the way that currently underwrites so much of how we live .. spoken with that unequivocal tone of entitlement that has become so automatic and unchallenged that to question it is often seen as being politically incorrect?

I love life. I also hold great compassion around the fact that we find ourselves in this bind. I understand only too well how enormously challenging it is to examine our complicity within systems and structures that are built on domination and consumption. I am, however, pleading on behalf of what makes our lives possible, to begin with. If we are genuinely devoted to speaking a **'language of life'**, then would we not be well served to bring the same level of scrutiny to our words and actions as was demonstrated to us by Marshall on so many occasions? Surely we have an obligation to be inclusive of life itself if we are going to be faithful to the terminology of being **'life-serving'**? Do the times that we now find ourselves living in not warrant it? Do our children and grandchildren not warrant it? Are we not after all custodians of life? Or are we mere consumers?

Does anyone think that Marshall would not want to include the non-human world in the discourse around needs? Does anyone believe that Marshall would choose to let his village die from drinking contaminated water because national corporations weren't willing to sit down to a conversation that would take collective needs into account, especially when it's not in their interest to do so? Does anyone believe that Marshall would not use protective use of force that to the corporations could appear to be an act of violence?

*"The more we heat up the planet, the more it costs all of us, not just in money, but in colossal famines, displacements, deaths, and species extinctions, as well as in the loss*

*of some of the things that make this planet a blue-green jewel, including its specialized habitats from the melting Arctic to bleaching coral reefs.” —Rebecca Solnit*

I personally believe that Marshall was much more interested in seeing life flourish on all levels than he was in being bound by the constraints of a communication model .. a model that I would say was not only designed to help people more peacefully resolve conflict but to also help people understand the impact of language and the degree to which dominant culture indoctrination, so deeply embedded in the language itself, functions as a colonizing and exploitative tool.

The more we focus on speaking to each other according to a model that grants us license to speak about our *‘culturally sanctioned individual rights’* for things like emotional and physical comfort and unbound freedom and independence, the more alienated we become from life itself and the inherent interdependence and reliance that mutual living requires.

*Ironically and tragically, we become even more estranged from ourselves and our capacity to live as deep humans and responsible citizens.*

I don’t believe that Rosenberg was teaching people to speak formulaically or generically from an enforced template laid down by four posts (OFNR), but that rather he was shedding light on elements of speech and thought that, along with other elements such as discriminating thought and charitable wonder, could effectively help people recognize the difference between life-serving and life- alienating words and actions .. and that over time and with practice, people might more consistently choose the former.

It’s my guess too that it was Marshall’s vision that, just as important

and of greater consequence than the personal and interpersonal dimensions of human life, appreciators and practitioners of his work would simultaneously recognize and call into question the systemic structures that bind us unwittingly to support and maintain an exploitative way of life. Marshall’s unwavering interest in social change must have only increased his longing for NVC to become a vehicle for it.

*If people have what is called transformative spirituality, they cannot rest when others are dying of starvation. It’s not enough that they believe that if they purify the self, energy will radiate to take care of things. —Marshall Rosenberg*

I think each one of us could think of things to include in the powerful quote above. If people have what is called transformative spirituality, they cannot rest when they are living off the avails of exploitation, they cannot rest when plastic is being ingested by

whales and killing them as a result, they cannot rest when pipelines are being built to support a way of life that is unsustainable, they cannot rest when growing numbers of youth choose suicide because of the sense of futility that haunts them, they cannot rest when refugee status claims more and more people, they cannot rest when please fill in the blank. Together we will mourn.

It's not enough that we believe that if we purify the self, energy will radiate to take care of things. I agree... it's simply not enough. I remember 15 years ago thanking Marshall for creating this wonderful tool for personal growth and transformation. I remember his response, "I want NVC to be used for social change." I still vividly remember that conversation .. and how awkward I felt that I didn't quite grasp the vision he had. I still don't know if I do, but I feel much closer to it now though than I ever have.

*Our survival as a species depends on our ability to recognize that our well-being and the well-being of others are in fact one and the same. —Marshall Rosenberg*

## Honouring

NVC can inarguably be effectively used for personal development. But as I've said to people who attend my workshops, it's wonderful if you can resolve a conflict with a family member and establish a solid loving relationship with them, and I don't discourage the work or argue its merit, but what good does it do in the context of social change when the culture your relationship is rooted in is sick and unchanged by your victory?

What good does it do when, after your warm exchange with that person, you return to a job that kills the world thereby ensuring that nothing really changes? As the eastern philosopher, Krishnamurti said, "*It's no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society*". It's time to think and act beyond personal self-interest. It's time to roll up our sleeves and engage in real social change! Let's keep Marshall's work alive in this precious world that needs our love and labour now more than ever!

*Rachelle Lamb's lifelong interest in human development, relationship dynamics and the roles that culture and ecology play in people's lives, along with her ability to skillfully pave the way for transformational dialogue between people consistently produces powerful learning experiences for individuals and audiences. Learn more about her at [www.RachelleLamb.com](http://www.RachelleLamb.com).*



