

# BEYOND GOOD & EVIL: Marshall Rosenberg On *Creating A Nonviolent World*

*An Interview by D. KILLIAN*



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I first met Marshall Rosenberg when I was assigned by a local paper to cover one of his "Nonviolent Communication" training seminars. Disturbed by the inequalities in the world and impatient for change, I couldn't imagine what use a communication technique could be in solving problems such as global warming or the debt of developing nations. But I was surprised by the visible effect Rosenberg's work had on individuals and families caught in conflict.

Nonviolent Communication, or NVC, has four steps: observing what is happening in a given situation; identifying what one is feeling; identifying what one is needing; and then making a request for what one would like to see occur. It sounds simple, yet it's more than a technique for resolving conflict. It's a different way of understanding human motivation and behavior.

Rosenberg learned about violence at an early age. Growing up in Detroit in the thirties and forties, he was beaten up for being a Jew and witnessed some of the city's worst race riots, which resulted in more than forty deaths in a matter of days. These experiences drove him to study psychology in an attempt to understand, as he puts it, "what happens to disconnect us from our compassionate nature, and what allows some people to stay connected to their compassionate nature under even the most trying circumstances."

Rosenberg completed his PhD in clinical psychology at the University of Wisconsin in 1961 and afterward went to work with youths at reform schools. The experience led him to conclude that, rather than help people to be more compassionate, clinical psychology actually contributed to the conditions that cause violence, because it categorized people and thus distanced them from each other; doctors were trained to see the diagnosis, not the person. He decided that violence did not arise from pathology, as psychology taught, but from the ways in which we communicate.

Humanist psychotherapist Carl Rogers, creator of "client-centered therapy," was an early influence on Rosenberg's theories, and Rosenberg worked with Rogers for several years before setting out on his own to teach others how to interact in nonaggressive ways. His method became known as Nonviolent Communication.

No longer a practicing psychologist, Rosenberg admits that he has struggled at times with his own method, resorting to familiar behavior or fearing the risks involved in a nonviolent approach. Yet each time he has followed through with Nonviolent Communication, he has been surprised by the results. At times, it has literally saved his life.

On one occasion in the late 1980s, he was asked to teach his method to Palestinian refugees in Bethlehem. He met with about 170 Muslim men at a mosque in the Deheisha Camp. On the way into the camp, he saw several empty tear-gas canisters along the road, each clearly marked "Made in U.S.A." When the men realized their would-be instructor was from the United States, they became angry. Some jumped to their feet and

began shouting, "Assassin! Murderer!" One man confronted Rosenberg, screaming in his face, "Child killer!"

Although tempted to make a quick exit, Rosenberg instead focused his questions on what the man was feeling, and a dialogue ensued. By the end of the day, the man who had called Rosenberg a murderer had invited him home to Ramadan dinner.

Rosenberg is founder and director of the nonprofit Center for Nonviolent Communication ([www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)). He is the author of *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion* (PuddleDancer Press) and has just completed a new book, to be released by PuddleDancer in fall 2003, on the application of NVC in education: *When Students Love to Learn and Teachers Love to Teach*. He is currently working on a third book addressing the social implications of Nonviolent Communication.

A tall, gaunt man, Rosenberg is soft-spoken but becomes animated when describing how Nonviolent Communication has worked for him and others. He has three children and currently lives in Wasserfallenof, Switzerland. Rosenberg is in great demand as a speaker and educator and maintains a relentless schedule. The day we spoke was his first free day in months. Afterward, he would be traveling to Israel, Brazil, Slovenia, Argentina, Poland, and Africa.



Marshall Rosenberg

**Killian:** Your method aims to teach compassion, but compassion seems more a way of being than a skill or technique. Can it really be taught?

**Rosenberg:** I would say it's a natural human trait. 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. The problem is that we are taught behaviors that disconnect us from this natural awareness. It's not that we have to learn how to be compassionate; we have to unlearn what we've been taught and get back to compassion.

**Killian:** If violence is learned, when did it start? It seems to have always been a part of human existence.

**Rosenberg:** Theologian Walter Wink estimates that violence has been the social norm for about eight thousand years. That's when a myth evolved that the world was created by a heroic, virtuous male god who defeated an evil female goddess. From that point on, we've had the image of the good guys killing the bad guys. And that has evolved into "retributive justice," which says that there are those who deserve to be punished and those who deserve to be rewarded. That belief has penetrated deep into our societies. Not every culture has been exposed to it, but, unfortunately, most have.

**Killian:** You've said that *deserve* is the most dangerous word in the language. Why?

**Rosenberg:** It's at the basis of retributive justice. For thousands of years, we've been operating under this system that says that people who do bad deeds are evil — indeed, that human beings are basically evil. According to this way of thinking, a



few good people have evolved, and it's up to them to be the authorities and control the others. And the way you control people, given that our nature is evil and selfish, is through a system of justice in which people who behave in a good manner get rewarded, while those who are evil are made to suffer. In order to see such a system as fair, one has to believe that both sides deserve what they get.

I used to live in Texas, and when they would execute somebody there, the good Baptist students from the local college would gather outside the prison and have a party. When the word came over the loudspeaker that the convict had been killed, there was loud cheering and so forth — the same kind of cheering that went on in some parts of Palestine when they found out about the September 11 terrorist attacks. When you have a concept of justice based on good and evil, in which people deserve to suffer for what they've done, it makes violence enjoyable.

**Killian:** But you're not opposed to judgments.

**Rosenberg:** I'm all for judgments. I don't think we could survive very long without them. We judge which foods will give us what our bodies need. We judge which actions are going to

meet our needs. But I differentiate between life-serving judgments, which are about our needs, and moralistic judgments that imply rightness or wrongness.

**Killian:** You've called instead for "restorative justice." How is that different?

**Rosenberg:** Restorative justice is based on the question: how do we restore peace? In other words, how do we restore a state in which people care about one another's well-being? Research indicates that perpetrators who go through restorative justice are less likely to repeat the behaviors that led to their incarceration. And it's far more healing for the victim to have peace restored than simply to see the other person punished.

The idea is spreading. I was in England about a year ago to present a keynote speech at the international conference on restorative justice. I expected thirty people might show up. I was delighted to see more than six hundred people at this conference.

**Killian:** How does restorative justice work?

**Rosenberg:** I have seen it work, for example, with women who have been raped and the men who raped them. The first

step is for the woman to express whatever it is that she wants her attacker to understand. Now, this woman has suffered almost every day for years since the attack, so what comes out is pretty brutal: "You monster! I'd like to kill you!" and so forth.

What I do then is help the prisoner to connect with the pain that is alive in this woman as a result of his actions. Usually what he wants to do is apologize. But I tell him apology is too cheap, too easy. I want him to repeat back what he hears her saying. How has her life been affected? When he can't repeat it, I play his role. I tell her I hear the pain behind all of the screams and shouting. I get him to see that the rage is on the surface, but beneath that lies the despair about whether her life will ever be the same again. And then I get the man to repeat what I've said. It may take three, or four, or five tries, but finally he hears the other person. Already at this point you can see the healing starting to take place — when the victim gets empathy.

Then I ask the man to tell me what's going on inside of him. How does he feel? Usually, again, he wants to apologize. He wants to say, "I'm a rat. I'm dirt." And again I get him to dig deeper. And it's very scary for these men. They're not used to dealing with feelings, let alone experiencing the horror of what it feels like to have caused another human being such pain.

When we've gotten past these first two steps, very often the victim screams, "How *could* you?" She's hungry to understand what would cause another person to do such a thing. Unfortunately, most of the victims I've worked with have been encouraged from the very beginning by well-meaning people to forgive their attackers. These people explain that the rapist must have been suffering and probably had a bad childhood. And the victim does try to forgive, but this doesn't help much. Forgiveness reached without first taking these other steps is just superficial. It suppresses the pain.

Once the woman has received some empathy, however, she wants to know what was going on in this man when he committed this act. I help the perpetrator go back to the moment of the act and identify what he was feeling, what needs were contributing to his actions.

The last step is to ask whether there is something more the victim would like the perpetrator to do, to bring things back to a state of peace. For example, she may want medical bills to be paid, or she may want some emotional restitution. But once there's empathy on both sides, it's amazing how quickly they start to care about one another's well-being.

**Killian:** What kinds of "needs" would cause a person to rape another human being?

**Rosenberg:** It has nothing to do with sex, of course. It has to do with the tenderness that people don't know how to get and often confuse with sex. In almost every case, the rapists themselves have been victims of some sort of sexual aggression or physical abuse, and they want someone else to understand how horrible it feels to be in this passive, weak role. They need empathy, and they've employed a distorted means of getting it: by inflicting similar pain on someone else. But the need is universal. All human beings have the same needs. Thankfully,

most of us meet them in ways that are not destructive to other people and ourselves.

**Killian:** We've long believed in the West that needs must be regulated and denied, but you're suggesting the opposite: that needs must be recognized and fulfilled.

**Rosenberg:** I'd say we teach people to misrepresent their needs. Rather than educating people to be conscious of their needs, we teach them to become addicted to ineffective strategies for meeting them. Consumerism makes people think that their needs will be met by owning a certain item. We teach people that revenge is a need, when in fact it's a flawed strategy. Retributive justice itself is a poor strategy. Mixed in with all that is a belief in competition, that we can get our needs met only at other people's expense. Not only that, but that it's heroic and joyful to win, to defeat someone else.

So it's very important to differentiate needs from strategies and to get people to see that any strategy that meets your needs at someone else's expense is not meeting *all* your needs. Because anytime you behave in a way that's harmful to others, you end up hurting yourself. As philosopher Elbert Hubbard

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once said, "We're not punished *for* our sins, but *by* them."

Whether I'm working with drug addicts in Bogotá, Colombia, or with alcoholics in the United States, or with sex offenders in prisons, I always start by making it clear to them that I'm not there to make them stop what they're doing. "Others have tried," I say. "You've probably tried yourself, and it hasn't worked." I tell them I'm there to help them get clear about what needs are being met by this behavior. And once we have gotten clear on what their needs are, I teach them to find more effective and less costly ways of meeting those needs.

*(end of excerpt)*