

Spiritual Basis of Nonviolent Communication

A Question and Answer Session with Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D.

Is spirituality important in the process of Nonviolent Communication?

I think it is important that people see that spirituality is at the base of Nonviolent Communication, and that they learn the mechanics of the process with that in mind. It's really a spiritual practice that I am trying to show as a way of life. Even though we don't mention this, people get seduced by the practice. Even if they practice this as a mechanical technique, they start to experience things between themselves and other people they weren't able to experience before. So eventually they come to the spirituality of the process. They begin to see that it's more than a communication process and realize it's really an attempt to manifest a certain spirituality. So I have tried to integrate the spirituality into the training in a way that meets my need not to destroy the beauty of it through abstract philosophizing.

What does God mean to you?

I need a way to think of God that would work for me, other words or ways to look at this beauty, this powerful energy, and so my name for God is "Beloved Divine Energy." For a while it was just Divine Energy but then I was reading some of the Eastern religions, and Eastern poets, and I loved how they had this personal, loving connection with this Energy. And I found that it added to me to call it "Beloved" Divine Energy. To me this Beloved Divine Energy is life, connection to life.

What is your favorite way of knowing Beloved Divine Energy?

It is how I connect with human beings. I know Beloved Divine Energy by connecting with human beings in a certain way. I not only see Divine Energy, I taste Divine Energy, I feel Divine Energy, and I am Divine Energy. I'm connected with Beloved Divine Energy when I connect with human beings in this certain way. Then God is very alive for me. Also talking with trees, talking with dogs and pigs, those are some of my other favorite ways.

How did you develop Nonviolent Communication?

Nonviolent Communication evolved from my attempt to get conscious of what this Beloved Divine Energy is and how to connect with it. I was very dissatisfied with clinical

psychology because it is pathology based and I didn't like its language. It didn't give me a view of the beauty of human beings. So, after I got my degree I decided to go more in the direction of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow.

I decided to look at this side and ask myself the scary question, "What are we and what are we meant to be?" I found that there was very little written about this in psychology. So I took a crash course in comparative religion because I saw they talked more about this question. And this word "love" kept coming up in each of them.

I used to hear the word love as many people use it in a religious sense like, "You should love everybody." I used to get really annoyed at the word love. "Oh yeah, I'm supposed to love Hitler?" I didn't know the words "New Age Bullshit" but I used what was my equivalent then. I tried to understand better what love means because I could see it had so much meaning for so many millions of people in all of these religions. What is it, and how do you do this "love"?

Nonviolent Communication really came out of my attempt to understand this concept of love and how to manifest it, how to do it. I came to the conclusion that it was not just something you feel, but it is something we manifest, something we do, something we have. And what is this manifestation? It is giving of ourselves in a certain way.

What do you mean, "giving of ourselves"?

To me, giving of ourselves means an honest expression of what's alive in us in this moment. It intrigues me why every culture asks upon greeting each other, "How are you?" It's such an important question. What a gift it is to be able to know at any given moment what is alive in someone.

To give a gift of one's self is a manifestation of love. It is when you reveal yourself nakedly and honestly, at any given moment, for no other purpose than as a gift of what's alive in you. Not to blame, criticize, or punish. Just "Here I am, and here is what I would like." This is my vulnerability at this moment. To me, that is a way of manifesting love.

And the other way we give of ourselves is through how we receive another person's message. To receive it empathically, connecting with what's alive in them, making no judgment. Just to hear what is alive in the other person and what they would like. So Nonviolent Communication is just a manifestation of what I understand love to be.

Nonviolent Communication came out of your desire to manifest love?

I was also helped by empirical research in psychology that defined the characteristics of healthy relationships and by studying people who were living manifestations of loving people. Out of these sources I pulled together this process that helped me to connect with people in what I could understand is a loving way.

And then I saw what happened when I did connect with people in this way. This beauty, this power, connected me with an energy that I choose to call Beloved Divine Energy. So Nonviolent Communication helps me stay connected with that beautiful Divine Energy within myself and to connect with it in others. And certainly when I connect that Divine Energy within myself with the Divine Energy in others, what happens then is the closest I know of what it is to be connected to God.

How do you prevent Ego from interfering with your connection with God?

By seeing Ego as very closely tied to the way my culture has trained me to think, and trained me to communicate. And how the culture has trained me to meet my needs in certain ways, to get my needs mixed up with certain strategies I might use to meet my needs. So I try to remain conscious of these three ways that the culture has programmed me to do things that really aren't in my best interest, to function more from Ego than from my connection with Divine Energy. I have tried to learn ways for training myself to be conscious when I'm thinking in these culturally learned ways and I've incorporated these into Nonviolent Communication.

Then you believe that the language of our culture prevents us from knowing our Divine Energy more intimately?

Oh yes, definitely. I think our language makes it really hard, especially the language given to us by the cultural training most of us seem to have gone through, and the associations "God" brings up for people. Judgmental, or right/wrong thinking is one of the hardest things I've found to overcome in teaching Nonviolent Communication over the years. The people that I work with have all gone to schools and churches and it's very easy for them, if they like Nonviolent Communication, to say it's the "right way" to communicate. It's very easy to think that Nonviolent Communication is the goal.

I've altered a Buddhist parable that relates to this question. Imagine a beautiful, whole, and sacred place. And imagine that you could really know God when you are in that place. But let's say that there is a river between you and that place and you'd like to get to that place but you've got to get over this river to do it. So you get a raft, and this raft is a real handy tool to get you over the river. Once you're across the river you can walk the rest of the several miles to this beautiful place. But the Buddhist parable ends by saying that, "One is a fool who continues on to the sacred place carrying the raft on their back."

Nonviolent Communication is a tool to get me over my cultural training so I can get to the place. It's not the place. If we get addicted to the raft, attached to the raft, it makes it harder to get to the place. People just learning the process of Nonviolent Communication can forget all about the place. If they get too locked into the raft, the process becomes mechanical.

Nonviolent Communication is one of the most powerful tools that I've found for connecting with people in a way that helps me get to the place where we are connected to

the Divine, where what we do toward one another comes out of Divine Energy. That's the place I want to get to.

Is this the spiritual basis of Nonviolent Communication?

The spiritual basis for me is that I'm trying to connect with the Divine Energy in others and connect them with the Divine in me, because I believe that when we are really connected with that Divinity within each other and ourselves, that people enjoy contributing to one another's well being more than anything else. So for me, if we're connected with the Divine in others and ourselves, we are going to enjoy what happens, and that's the spiritual basis. In this place violence is impossible.

Is this lack of connection to Divine Energy responsible for violence in the world?

I would say it this way: I think we have been given the gift of choice to create the world of our choosing. And we've been given all of this great and abundant world for creating a world of joy and nurturing. To me, the violence in the world comes about when we get alienated or disconnected from this Energy. How do we get connected when we are educated to be disconnected? I believe it's our cultural conditioning and education that disconnects us from God, especially our education about God.

Walter Wink writes about how domination cultures use certain teachings about God to maintain oppression. That's why Bishops and Kings have often been closely related. The Kings needed the Bishops to justify the oppression, to interpret the holy books in ways that justified punishment, domination, and so forth.

How do we overcome this conditioning?

I'm often in between people in a lot of pain. I remember working with twenty Serbians and twenty Croatians. Some of the people there had family members killed by the other side and they all had generations of poison pumped into their heads about the other side. They spent three days expressing their rage and pain to each other. Fortunately we were there about seven days.

One word I haven't used yet in speaking about this is the word "inevitability". So many times I have seen that no matter what has happened, if people connect in this certain way that it is inevitable that they will end up enjoying giving to one another. It is inevitable. For me my work is like watching the magic show. It's too beautiful for words.

But sometimes this Divine Energy doesn't work as fast as I think it should. I remember sitting there in the middle of all this rage and pain and thinking, "Divine Energy, if you can heal all this stuff why are you taking so long, why are you putting these people through this?" And the Energy spoke to me, and it said, "You just do what you can to connect. Bring your energy in. Connect and help the other people connect and let me take care of the rest." But even though that was going on in one part of my brain, I knew joy

was inevitable. If we could just keep getting connected to our own Divine Energy and to each other's.

And it happened. It happened with great beauty. The last day everybody was talking about joy. And many of them said, "You know I thought I was never going to feel joy again after what we've been through." This was the theme on everybody's lips. So that evening the twenty Serbians and twenty Croatians, who seven days earlier had only unimaginable pain in relation to one another, celebrated the joy of life together.

We gain this connection to each other by knowing God?

Here again I want to stay away from intellectualizing about God. If by "knowing God" we mean this intimate connection with Beloved Divine Energy, then we gain every second as experiencing heaven.

The heaven I gain from knowing God is this inevitability, to know it is inevitable, that no matter what the hell is going on that if we get to this level of connection with each other, if we get in touch with each other's Divine Energy, it's inevitable that we will enjoy giving and we'll give back to life. I've been through such ugly stuff with people that I don't get worried about it anymore, it's inevitable. If we get that quality of connection, we'll like where it gets us.

It amazes me how effective it is. I could tell you similar examples between the extremist Israelis, both politically and religiously, and the same on the Palestinian side, and between

the Hutus and the Tutsis, and the Christian tribe in Nigeria. With all of them it amazes me

how easy it is to bring about this reconciliation and healing. Once again, all we have to do

is get both sides connected to the other person's needs. To me the needs are the quickest, closest way to getting in connection with that Divine Energy. Everyone has the same needs. The needs come because we're alive.

How do you get enemies to recognize that they need to give to each other?

A: When you get people connected at that level it's hard to maintain those "enemy" images. Nonviolent Communication in its purity is the most powerful, quickest way I've found to get people to go from life alienated ways of thinking where they want to hurt each other, to enjoying giving to each other.

When you have a couple of people facing each other, Hutu and Tutsi, and their families have been killed by each other, it's amazing that in two or three hours we can get them nurturing each other. It's inevitable. Inevitable. That's why I use this approach.

It amazes me how simple it is given the amount of suffering that has gone on, and how quickly it can happen. Nonviolent Communication really quickly heals when people have

experienced a lot of pain. This motivates me to want to make it happen even more quickly because the way we're doing it now still takes a while.

How do we get this done more quickly with the other 800,000 Hutus and Tutsis, and the rest of the planet? I would like to explore what would happen if we could make movies or television shows of this process, because I've seen that when two people go through the process with other people watching, that vicarious learning, healing and reconciliations happen. So I would like to explore ways to use the media to get masses of people to go quickly through this process together.

Have you encountered any cultural or language barriers to this process?

A: This amazes me how few and how little they are. When I first started to teach this process in another language I really doubted that it could be done. I remember the first time I was in Europe I was going to go first to Munich and then to Geneva. My colleague and I both doubted that we could get this through in another language. She was going to do it in French and I would be there for her to ask me questions if something came up. I was going to at least try to see if we could go through translators. But it worked so well without any problems, and I find the same thing everywhere. So I just don't worry about it, I'll do it in English and you translate it and it works very well. I can't think of any culture that we've had any problem with other than little things, but not with the essence of it. Not only have we had no problem but also there are repeated variations of people saying that this is essentially what their religion says. It's old stuff, they know this stuff, and they're grateful for this manifestation, but it's nothing new.

Do you believe a spiritual practice is important for practicing nonviolence?

I recommend in all workshops that people take time to ask themselves this question, "How do I choose to connect with other human beings?" and to be as conscious as they can about that. To make sure it's their choice and not the way they've been programmed to choose. Really, what is the way you would choose to connect with other human beings?

Gratitude also plays a big role for me. If I express gratitude when I am conscious of the human act that I want to express it for, consciousness of how I feel when the act occurs, whether it's my act or someone else's, and what needs of mine it fulfills, then expressing gratitude fills me with consciousness of the power that we human beings have to enrich lives. It makes me aware that we are Divine Energy, that we have such power to make life wonderful, and that there is nothing we like better than to do just that.

To me, that is powerful evidence of our Divine Energy, that we have this power to make life so wonderful, and that there is nothing we like more. That's why part of my spiritual practice is just to be conscious of gratitude.

How basic is this need to give to one another?

I think the need to enrich life is one of the most basic and powerful needs we all have. Now another way to say this is that we need to act from the Divine Energy within us. And I think that when we “are” that Divine Energy that there is nothing we like more, nothing in which we find more joy, than enriching life, than using our immense power to enrich life.

But when we are trying to meet this need of ours to “live” this Divine Energy, trying to contribute to life, there is a request that goes with it. We have a request for feedback from whichever creature whose life we are trying to enrich. We want to know in fact, “Is my intention and my action being fulfilled?” Was there fulfillment?

In our culture that request gets distorted into our thinking that we have a “need” for the other person to love us for what we’ve done, to appreciate what we’ve done, to approve of us for what we’ve done. And that distorts and screws up the beauty of the whole process. It wasn’t their approval that we needed. Our very intent was to use our energy to enrich life. But we need the feedback. How do I know my effort was successful unless I get feedback?

And I can use this feedback to help me know if I am coming out of Divine Energy. I know that I am coming out of Divine Energy when I value criticism as much as a thank you.

—Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D.