

Practical *Spirituality*

Reflections on the Spiritual Basis
of Nonviolent Communication

*A Nonviolent Communication™
presentation and workshop transcription by*

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*A Q&A Session with
Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD*

Whenever Marshall Rosenberg speaks about deeply held beliefs—spirituality, concepts of God, views of love—two themes always emerge: 1) the greatest joy springs from connecting to life by contributing to our own and others’ well-being, and 2) spirituality and love are more about what we do than what we feel.

People frequently ask Marshall how he got to that place, how he relates to the religious beliefs of others, and what his views mean for the practice of Nonviolent Communication. What follows are excerpts of Marshall’s unscripted, verbal responses to queries from media interviewers and workshop participants on the subject of spirituality, the concept of the Divine, the spiritual basis of NVC, and applying NVC values to social change.

Q: How do we connect with the Divine through Nonviolent Communication?

A: 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 NVC 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 make a point of mentioning this, people get seduced by the practice. Even if they practice NVC 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 our spirituality. I have tried to integrate the spirituality into the practice of NVC in a way that meets my need not to destroy the beauty of it through abstract philosophizing.

The kind of world I'd like to live in will require some rather significant social changes, but the changes that I'd like to see happen probably won't happen unless the people working toward them are coming out of a different spirituality than what has led to the predicaments we're in now. So, our training is designed to help people make sure that the spirituality that's guiding them is one of their own choosing and not one they've internalized by the culture. And that they proceed in creating social change out of that spirituality.

Q: What does "God" mean to you?

A: I need a way to think of God that works 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 my life to call it Beloved Divine Energy. To me this Beloved Divine Energy is Life, connection to life.

Q: What is your favorite way of knowing Beloved Divine Energy?

A: 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 way. Then God is very alive for me.

Q: What religious beliefs, teachings, or writings have had the greatest influence on you?

A: It’s hard for me to say which of the various religions on the planet have had the most impact on me. Probably Buddhism as much as any. I like so much of what I understand the Buddha or the people who quoted the Buddha to be saying. For example, the Buddha makes it very clear: Don’t get addicted to your strategies, your requests, or your desires. That’s a very important part of our training: to not mix real human needs with the way we’ve been educated to get those needs met. So, be careful to not get your strategies mixed up with your needs. We don’t need a new car, for example. Some people may choose a new car as a strategy for meeting a need for

reliability or peace of mind, but you've got to watch out, because society can trick you into thinking it's the new car that you really need. This part of our training is very much in harmony with my understanding of the Buddha.

Almost all of the religions and mythologies I've studied say a very similar message, one that Joseph Campbell, the mythologist, summarizes in some of his work: *Don't do anything that isn't play*. And what they mean by play is willingly contributing to life. So, don't do anything to avoid punishment; don't do anything for rewards; don't do anything out of guilt, shame, and the vicious concepts of duty and obligation. What you do will be play when you can see how it enriches life. I get that message from my understanding not only of the Buddha, but also from what I have learned about Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. I think it's a natural language. Do that which contributes to life.

Q: Doesn't the influence of religion and spirituality promote passivity, or an "opiate of the masses" effect?

A: I'm very worried about any spirituality that allows us to just sit comfortably in the world and say, "But I am helping the world, the energy alone coming from me is going to create social change." Rather, I trust a spirituality that leads people to go forward and transform the world, that doesn't just sit there with this beautiful image of radiating energy. I want to see that energy reflected in the person's actions as they go out and make things happen. It's something you do, a practical spirituality.

Q: So Nonviolent Communication evolved in part from spiritual origins?

A: Nonviolent Communication evolved from my attempt to get conscious about Beloved Divine Energy and how to connect with it. I was dissatisfied with input from my chosen field of clinical psychology because it was and 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 ask myself the scary questions, "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 dealt more with this question. And this word *love* kept coming up in each of them.

I used to hear the word *love* as many people used 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.

Q: What do you mean by “giving of ourselves”?

A: To me, giving of ourselves means an honest expression of what’s alive in us in this moment. It intrigues me that every culture asks upon greeting each other, “How are you?” They don’t use those words. In English they say it this way: *How are you?* In Spanish, *¿Cómo estás?* French is *Comment allez-vous?* German is *Wie Geht es Dir?* We say it as a social ritual, but it’s a very important question, because if we’re to live in peace and harmony, if we’re to enjoy contributing to one another’s well-being, we need to know what’s alive in one another. 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’s a gift when you reveal yourself nakedly and honestly, at any given moment, for no other purpose than to reveal 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. In that way it’s similar to the Judeo-Christian concepts of “Love your neighbor as yourself” and “Judge not lest you be judged.”

Q: Nonviolent Communication came out of your desire to manifest love?

A: 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 a 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 is the closest thing to knowing what it is to be connected to God.

It helps to remember that a key purpose of Nonviolent Communication is to connect with other people—and thus with Divine Energy—in a way that enables compassionate giving to take place. It's giving that comes from the heart willingly, where we are giving service to ourselves and others, not out of duty, obligation, not out of fear of punishment, hope for a reward, not out of guilt or shame, but for what I consider is our nature, our nature to enjoy giving to one another. In Nonviolent Communication, we strive to connect with one another in a way that allows our nature to come forward. When I say that I think it's our nature to enjoy giving, some people may wonder whether I'm a little bit naïve and unaware of all the violence in the world. How can I think it's our nature to enjoy compassionate giving with what's happening in the world? Unfortunately, I see the violence. I work in places

like Rwanda, Israel, Palestine, Sri Lanka, and I'm well aware of all the violence in the world, but I don't think that's our nature.

In every place that I work I ask people the following: "Think of something you've done within the last twenty-four hours that in some way has contributed to making life more wonderful for somebody." And when they've recalled something I then say, "Now, how do you feel when you are aware of how that act contributed to making life more wonderful for somebody?" And everybody has a smile on their face. You see, when we are aware of the power we have to enrich life, it feels good: It feels good to serve life. And then I ask people, "Can anybody think of anything that's more fulfilling in life than to use our efforts this way?" And I've asked that question all over our planet and everyone seems in agreement. There's nothing that is better, nothing that feels better, nothing is more enjoyable than using our efforts in the service of life, contributing to one another's well-being.

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

A: 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 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 become conscious of this culturally learned

thinking, and I've incorporated these into Nonviolent Communication.

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

A: 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 the word *God* brings up for many 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, if they like Nonviolent Communication, it's very easy for them 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 across 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. NVC is 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 sometimes 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 us get 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.

Q: Is this the spiritual basis of Nonviolent Communication?

A: 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 one another 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.

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

A: 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 this great and abundant world for creating a world of joy and nurturing. To me, violence in the world comes about when we get alienated or disconnected from this Energy.