

Foreword

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No one deserves our gratitude more than the late Marshall Rosenberg, who lived his life just as the title of one of his books states: *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict*. He was keenly aware of the maxim (or warning) that's contained in the subtitle of that book: *What You Say Next Will Change Your World*. Personal reality always contains a story, and the story we live, beginning from infancy, is based on language. This became the foundation of Marshall's approach to conflict resolution, getting people to exchange words in a way that excludes judgments, blame, and violence.

The contorted faces of protestors on the streets that make such disturbing images on the evening news are more than images. Each face, each shout, each gesture has a history. Everyone clings to their history with a vengeance, because it anchors their identity. So when Marshall advocated peaceful talk, he was advocating a new identity at the same time. He fully realized this fact. As he states about Nonviolent Communication and the role of the mediator in this new third edition, "We're trying to live a different value system while we are asking for things to change."

In his vision of a new value system, conflicts are resolved without the usual frustrating compromises. Instead, the contending parties approach each other with respect. They ask about each other's needs, and in an atmosphere free of passions and prejudices, they reach a connection. Gazing on a world rife with

war and violence, where us-versus-them thinking is the norm, and where countries can break all bonds of civilized existence to commit unbearable atrocities, a new value system seems far away. At one European conference for mediators, a skeptic criticized Marshall's approach as psychotherapy. In popular language, isn't he asking us to simply forget the past and just be friends, a remote prospect not just in the war-torn areas but in any divorce case?

Value systems are packed in the luggage of every worldview. Not only are they inescapable, but people are proud of them—there's a long tradition around the world of prizing and fearing warriors at the same time. Jungians tell us that the archetype of Mars, the volatile god of war, is imbedded in everyone's unconscious, making conflict and aggression inevitable, a kind of inherent vice.

But there's an alternative view of human nature, eloquently expressed in this book that must be considered, because it's our only real hope. In this view, we are not our stories. These stories are self-created fictions that remain intact through habit, group coercion, old conditioning, and lack of self-awareness. Even the best stories collaborate in violence. If you want to use force to protect your family, guard yourself from attack, fight against wrongdoing, prevent crime, and engage in a so-called "good war," you have been co-opted by the siren song of violence. If you decide to opt out, there's a sizable chance that society will turn on you and exact retribution. In short, finding a way out isn't easy.

In India there's an ancient model for nonviolent living known as Ahimsa, which is central to the nonviolent life. Ahimsa is usually defined as nonviolence, although its meaning extends from Mahatma Gandhi's peaceful protests to Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life. "Do no harm" would be the first axiom of Ahimsa. What so impressed me about Marshall Rosenberg, who passed away at eighty, just six weeks before I write this, is that he grasped both levels of Ahimsa, action and consciousness.

The actions are well described in the following pages as principles of Nonviolent Communication, so I won't repeat them here. To be in Ahimsa consciousness is much more powerful, and Marshall possessed that trait. In any conflict, he didn't choose

sides or even care primarily what their stories were. Recognizing that all stories lead to conflict, either overtly or covertly, he focused on connections as a psychological bridge. This is in keeping with another axiom of Ahimsa: It's not what you do that counts, it's the quality of your attention. As far as the legal system is concerned, a divorce is over once the two parties settle on how to split their assets. But this is far from the result that's reached emotionally between the two divorced parties. Too much has been said, to use Marshall's wording, that changed their world.

Aggression is built into the ego system, which totally focuses on "I, me, and mine" whenever conflict arises. Society pays lip service to saints and their vow to serve God instead of themselves, but there's a huge gap between the values we espouse and the way we actually live. Ahimsa closes this gap only by expanding a person's awareness. The only way to resolve all violence is to give up your story. No one can be enlightened who still has a personal stake in the world—that could be the third axiom of Ahimsa. But this seems like a teaching as radical as Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount when he promises that the meek shall inherit the earth.

In both cases, the point isn't to change your actions but to change your consciousness. To do that, you must walk a path from A to B, where A is a life based on the incessant demands of the ego and B is selfless awareness. To be frank, nobody really desires selfless awareness; from the viewpoint of looking out for number one, it sounds at once scary and impossible. What's the payoff if you depose the ego, which is all about payoffs? Once the ego is gone, do you sit around passively like a spiritual beanbag?

The answer lies in those moments when the personal self falls away naturally and spontaneously. These occur in moments of meditation or simply deep contentment. Selfless awareness is the state we're in when Nature or art or music creates a sense of wonder. The only difference between those moments—to which we can add all experiences of creativity, love, and play—and Ahimsa is that they flicker in and out while Ahimsa is a settled state. It reveals that stories and the egos that fuel them are illusions, self-created models for survival and selfishness. The payoff for

Ahimsa isn't that you upgrade the illusion, which is what the ego is always striving to do with more money, possessions, and power. The payoff is that you get to be who you really are.

Higher consciousness is too lofty as the term for Ahimsa. Normal consciousness is more accurate in a world where the norm is so abnormal that it amounts to psychopathology. It's not normal to live in a world where thousands of nuclear warheads are aimed at the enemy and terrorism is an acceptable religious act—they are merely the norm.

For me, the legacy of Marshall's lifelong work doesn't lie in how he revolutionized the role of the mediator, valuable as that was. It lies in the new value system he lived by, which in truth is quite ancient. Ahimsa has to be revived in every generation, because human nature is torn between peace and violence. Marshall Rosenberg gave proof that entering this state of expanded awareness was real and, when it came to settling disputes, very practical. He leaves footprints that the rest of us can follow. If we have true self-interest at heart, we will follow. It's the only alternative in a world desperately seeking wisdom and the end of strife.

—Deepak Chopra