

Being Genuine

Stop Being Nice, Start Being Real



THOMAS D'ANSEMBOURG

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*I flit from perch to perch, in
an ever-shrinking cage, the door
of which is open, wide open.*

GYULA ILLYÉS
Hungarian poet

*The story of my life began on the day I decided not to
live it as if I was going up the down-escalator.*

PASCAL DE DUVE
Belgian poet

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*To Valérie
and our children, Camille, Anna, and Julia,
with love, affection, and respect*

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PREFACE

Moving From Being Nice to Being Genuine

Expressing one's truth while respecting others and respecting oneself . . . that is the journey on which attorney and author Thomas d'Ansembourg invites us to accompany him. This is the invitation he extends to us in this book by suggesting that we plunge straight into the heart of how we enter into dialogue with ourselves and others. In it, we learn how to reprogram the way we express ourselves. Once that has been done, there comes the joy of being closer to others and closer to ourselves. There is the joy of being open to others. And at the heart of this process lies the possibility of giving up the familiar, even comfortable, confusions with which we so often content ourselves, instead of gaining access to a universe of choice and freedom.

What finer prospect, what finer program? This isn't about skimming the surface, like dragonflies flitting above a summer pond. Rather, the method of communication put forward by Thomas d'Ansembourg calls into question our psychological makeup, inducing us to delve more deeply into ourselves and our relationships.

- It is a demanding venture because in order to succeed in clearly formulating what is alive in ourselves, we often need to search out unconscious conditionings.
- It is a revolutionary venture because along the road we discover that our plan to express our true self plainly puts our vulnerability on the line, puts our pride to the test.
- It is a daunting venture because it highlights our propensity to leave things as they are for fear of upsetting others—and for fear that others might upset us in turn if we truly speak out.
- Finally, it is a venture as challenging as it is stimulating, for it invites each of us to work on changing ourselves rather than expecting anyone and everyone else to change.

I personally became aware of the potential of Nonviolent Communication when I was traveling in the Sahara Desert. With the assistance of Jean-Marie Delacroix, I was guiding a group of twenty-four men who were taking part in a program called The Inner Flame. At Thomas d'Ansembourg's suggestion, I had accepted responsibility for some young people from the Cops and Hoods organization, as well as some of its adult facilitators to provide us with technical assistance during this adventure. Some years earlier, I had learned that this organization was involved with street children. Pierre-Bernard Velge, the founder, and his right-hand man, Thomas d'Ansembourg, had invited me to join them as psychological counselor for a desert expedition in which the troubled youngsters were taking part. I had subsequently persuaded the twenty-four men to join us in our program, and I'd gotten really caught up in this venture, which was designed to help the men with their social reintegration.

I had indeed gotten caught up in the program, but I began to regret it when one young member of the program threatened an adult with a knife. We were hours away by motor vehicle from any sign of civilization, and danger was now staring us in the face. In absolutely no way did I want to jeopardize the people I was responsible for and could

think of only one solution: Pack the whole group and head home as soon as possible. In fact, that was an easy way of getting rid of the problem for myself.

I told Thomas about my intentions. Without rejecting my proposal, he asked me for a few hours more time. Long discussions took place on the sand dune, at a slight distance from the campground. To my great surprise, the conversations led to unity among the entire group. Moreover, no further problems occurred to mar our trip. While admiring Thomas's patience, I was telling myself that the Nonviolent Communication technique he was using would be worthwhile studying.

Subsequently, Thomas became an assistant and a regular cofacilitator at my workshops. Within the *Cœur.com* association, I still often call him in to settle tricky situations. I attended his introductory Nonviolent Communication workshop, and the basic principles of this discipline became those of my own seminars.

Why? Because I realized that most of us, first and foremost myself, are still in our infancy when we endeavor to communicate. We are inclined to assess others, to judge them and to label them without disclosing to them our own feelings and without daring to express our *true self*. Who among us can boast of having taken stock of the feelings that underlie our judgments before we enunciate them? Who takes the trouble to identify and name the needs that have been forced back and camouflaged behind the words we speak? Who tries to make realistic, negotiable requests in their relationships with others?

In my view this way of communicating, based on realistic and negotiable requests, is all the more interesting as it complements what has already been proposed by other methods, among others those of Jacques Salomé and Thomas Gordon. They all rightly stress the need to learn to express ourselves using "I" messages, based on our own life experience and to admit that our needs, in and of themselves, are legitimate. However, such legitimacy has its limitations. It needs

to find expression in the formulation of negotiable requests made to others, unless we want to enclose ourselves in a bubble of egocentricity; for although our needs are justified, they cannot all be met. Compromises acceptable to all parties must be sought. In my view it is here that Nonviolent Communication shows its true colors.

Such a technique would make miracles in politics. Moreover, it should be taught to schoolchildren as soon as they go to primary school in order to help them steer clear of the bad habit of losing touch with themselves and with their own modes of expression. As for couples, where friction between human beings is sometimes painfully and dangerously intensified, NVC truly comes into its own to prove its efficacy. Nonviolent Communication to me appears to be the antechamber to psychology and also what makes it possible in the psychological understanding of our human challenges to find day-to-day applications of a very practical nature.

In truth, although the principles of any communication method are in general easy to grasp, it's always practice that remains the difficulty. Bearing this in mind, the book you hold in your hands is a genuine reference manual. It shows the talent and openness of the mind of the author, who provides the world with an approach to feelings and needs in which one can see two aspects of his long practice at the bar: rigor of analysis and a down-to-earth concern for effectiveness.

Among the relatively few people who have been bold enough to speak *their true selves*, Thomas d'Ansembourg is for me the one who succeeds with the greatest agility. This poet of communication, this explorer of inner and outer deserts, has understood that in order for there to be true communication between human beings, it is necessary to give up power relationships and take the risk of expressing one's own truth. I saw him transform himself and, in a few years, move from being a nice little boy, afraid of committing himself, to becoming an amorous husband and a devoted father. I witnessed him gradually withdrawing from his lawyer's and banking

consultant's world in order to be faithful to himself—and to help others become so as well.

I am happy to see him at his best in this book, written to teach us that in the final analysis there is no intimacy with others unless there is intimacy with oneself . . . and no intimacy with oneself unless there is intimacy with others. With the gentleness and elegance of Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, Thomas d'Ansembourg reminds us that we can join others without ceasing to be ourselves.

Guy Corneau

INTRODUCTION

I have no hope of getting out of my solitude by myself. Stones have no hope of being anything but stones. However, through collaboration they get themselves together and become a Temple.

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

French writer

I was a lawyer, nicely and “oh, so politely” depressed and demotivated. Today, it is with enthusiasm that I lead conferences, seminars, and private consultations. I was a bachelor terrified at the idea of emotional commitment, and overwork gave me solace in solitude. Today, I’m a husband and a father and am overjoyed to be so. I was living with a well-concealed but constant inner sadness. Today, I am filled with confidence and joy.

What happened?

I *became aware* that by ignoring my own needs for such a long time I was inflicting violence upon myself, and I tended to deflect this violence toward others. Then, after experiencing the insights and power of Nonviolent Communication, I *accepted* that I had needs, that I could listen to them, differentiate between them, establish priorities among them, and take care of *myself* rather

than complaining about no one taking care of me. All the energy I had previously devoted to complaining, rebelling, and being nostalgic, I little by little gathered together, *re-centered*, and placed in the service of inner transformation, creation, and relationship. I also became aware of and accepted the fact that others also have their needs and that I am not necessarily the only person with the skills and availability to meet such needs.

The process of Nonviolent Communication was and continues to be for me an inspiring and reassuring guide in the transformation I sought to undergo. I hope it will inspire and reassure readers in understanding their own relationships, beginning with the relationship with themselves.

Through this book, I wish to illustrate the process that Marshall Rosenberg¹ developed in the spirit and the line of thought of the works of Carl Rogers. Those acquainted with the work of Thomas Gordon also will find notions they are familiar with. I hope in this way to show my trust that if each of us accepts our own violence, the violence we often exert unconsciously and very subtly on ourselves and others (often with the best of intentions)—and takes care to understand how the violence is triggered—each will be able to work toward defusing it. We will then be able to create more satisfying relationships . . . relationships that are both freer and more responsible.

Marshall Rosenberg calls his process Nonviolent Communication (NVC). I myself refer to it as conscious and nonviolent communication. Violence in fact is a consequence of our lack of consciousness. Were we more aware inside of what we are truly experiencing, we would find it easier to find opportunities to express our strength without committing aggression against one another. I believe that there is violence as soon as we use our strength not to create, stimulate, or protect but to constrain, whether the constraint is in regard to ourselves or to others. Our strength may be emotional, psychological, moral, hierarchical, or institutional. Thus subtle violence, the kid-glove violence (especially emotional violence), is infinitely more widespread than the violence that expresses itself through

blows, crimes, and insults, and it is all the more insidious for not being named.

If the violence is not named, it is because it is hidden within the words themselves we use—innocently and sometimes not so innocently—each day. Our vocabulary is violence’s day-to-day vector. Indeed, we translate our thoughts and therefore our consciousness mainly through the intermediary of words. We therefore have the choice of communicating our thinking and our awareness through words that divide, oppose, separate, compare, categorize, or condemn—or through words that gather, propose, reconcile, and stimulate. Thus by working on our consciousness and our language, we can suppress the interference that hampers communication and generates ordinary violence.

There is, therefore, nothing new about the underlying principles of Nonviolent Communication. For centuries, they have been part and parcel of the wisdom of the world, a wisdom so little implemented because it doubtless seems impractical in most cases. What I think *is* new, and what I have been able to verify each day in its genuine practicality, is the way the process proposed by Marshall Rosenberg is articulated.

On the one hand, there are the concepts of communication and nonviolence. These two notions and the values they convey, however attractive they may be, often leave us feeling helpless: Is it always possible to communicate without violence? In our dealings with others, how can we make both real and concrete the values to which everyone adheres in thought: respect, freedom, mutual compassion, responsibility?

On the other hand, there are the components and challenges of communication. Through a four-point process, we are invited to become aware that we always react to something—to a situation (point 1, observation); that this observation always produces a feeling in us (point 2, feeling); that this feeling corresponds to a need (point 3, need); that this need invites us to make a request (point 4, request). This method is based on the fact that we feel better when we clearly see what we are reacting to; when we understand properly both our feelings and our

needs; and when we manage to formulate negotiable requests while at the same time feeling safe in being able to receive others' reactions, whatever they may be. This method also is based on the observed fact that we feel better when we clearly see what others are referring to or are reacting to, when we understand their feelings and needs and hear a negotiable request that allows us the freedom to be in agreement or not—and to seek together a solution meeting the needs of both parties, not one to the detriment of the other. Thus, beyond being a method of communicating, Nonviolent Communication leads to an art of living in relationships, as well as respecting oneself, others, and the world at large.

In this computer era, more and more people communicate faster and faster but less and less well! More and more people are suffering from loneliness, a lack of understanding, meaninglessness, and a loss of reference points. Organizational and operational preoccupations take precedence over the quality of our relationships. It is a matter of urgency to explore other ways of relating.

Many of us feel tired regarding our inability to express ourselves genuinely and be truly listened to and understood. Even though (using modern technology) we exchange a great deal of information, we are still handicapped when it comes to *true* expression and listening. Out of the resulting powerlessness are born fears that trigger old fallback reflexes: fundamentalisms, nationalisms, racisms. In the excitement of technological conquest—particularly worldwide means of communication in the totally new context of the interweaving of cultures, races, religions, fashions, political and economic paradigms that these means allow for—are we not running the risk of missing out on what is intimate and true? This intimacy and truth are so invaluable that any other quest might well prove fruitless, even pointless: The end purpose here is encounters, true encounters between human beings, with no games, no masks, no interference from our fears, habits, and clichés that don't carry the weight of our conditionings and old reflexes—and that

subsequently bring us out of the isolation of our telephones, our screens, and our virtual images.

It would appear that here lies a new continent to be conquered, little explored to this day, that strikes fear into many: *a true relationship between two individuals who are free and responsible.*

If this exploration strikes fear into our hearts, it is because many of us tend to be afraid of losing ourselves in a relationship. We have learned to alienate ourselves from our true self in order to be with another.

What I am proposing is to explore a hypothesis for genuine relations between human beings who are free and responsible at the same time, a hypothesis that I will characterize by a twofold question that, it seems to me, is so often at the center of the existential difficulties many experience: *How can one be oneself without stopping being with another, and how can one be with another without stopping being oneself?*

While writing this book, I regularly had a concern in the back of my mind. I know that books can inform and can contribute to our evolving. However, I also know that intellectual understanding can never “in and of itself” transform hearts. The transformation of the heart is born out of emotional understanding, that is, experience and practice over the duration. This book itself is an example of that: It is largely based on experience and practice.

Since my first contact with Nonviolent Communication, I have striven to consolidate knowledge through practice, exercising wariness toward theoretical knowledge that often leads us to believe that we have understood it all—which perhaps is true intellectually—whereas we have taken nothing at all on board. Such an illusion enables us to skirt any opportunity to transform ourselves in any true or durable manner.

This is why I have no reference works to propose, except for Marshall Rosenberg’s book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, although I realize and am thankful that the notions I am tackling here also have been explored by other authors. In addition, I quote the wisdom of dozens of sages and great thinkers.

I am taking a risk by committing to the pages of this book words and notions that are necessarily static regarding what is actually learned through *experience* in workshops or seminars, role-plays, integration time, listening to emotions, feedback, silences, and the resonance of a group. The risk is that the process may appear simplistically utopian. I accept this risk because it is a process and not a trick; it is a state of consciousness to be practiced as one practices a foreign language. And everyone knows that a read-through of *Simple French from A to Z* will not win a person a speech-making competition in Paris. Nor will that person dare to step into the arena of a conversation in French at a party! First of all, one modestly plays one's scales. So in the end, does not the word *utopia* offer us a taste of another place to strive toward?

This book seeks to speak precisely to those who are heading for another place, a place of *true* encounters between human beings. My work allows me to meet such people—top executives in business, couples and families from every walk of life, individuals on welfare, persons in education or in hospitals, young people in distress—every day in the most diverse of environments. And each day I can bear witness that this place does exist—if only we want it to.