

# Getting Past the Pain



## Introduction

The following was excerpted from a workshop given on October 4, 2002 by Marshall Rosenberg, founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication. *Getting Past the Pain* focuses on mending our relationships with each other and gives us skills for understanding and resolving our conflicts, for healing old hurts, and for developing satisfying relationships using Nonviolent Communication<sup>SM</sup> (NVC).

Here you will find steps you can take for the healing or reconciliation of any conflicted relationship, whether at work, at home, at school, or in your community. It will also give you a sense of the energy of empathy: the compassion and the heartfelt “presence” necessary for healing to take place. Nonviolent Communication skills empower you to make lasting peace, and even to prevent trouble from happening in the first place. Join in on this workshop dialogue and enjoy the magic that understanding brings when we listen and speak from the heart.

The training opens with Marshall Rosenberg role-playing a situation posed by an audience member. In the role plays, participants are identified as UF (unidentified female participant), UM (unidentified male participant), and MBR (Marshall B. Rosenberg). All other words are Marshall’s. We pick up the conversation with a question from one of the participants of the workshop.

## Role-Play: Healing Bitterness

MBR: Good afternoon. So, what could I share with you about healing and reconciliation that would meet your needs? Would you like to hear me talk about it? Or maybe you have some pain left over from something that happened to you in the past with somebody, and would like us to do it “live” and not just talk about it?

UF: I wonder how I can get past or release a lot of bitterness I have towards somebody.

MBR: How about if I use Nonviolent Communication and play the role of the person that you have the bitterness towards? I'll be that person, but I'm going to be speaking to you as someone living Nonviolent Communication. All you need to do is just say what you want to say. Okay, you got the game? Good, now who am I going to be?

UF: My brother.

MBR: (BEGINS PLAYING THE ROLE) Sister, I am very touched that you want to heal this bitterness between us, and by the courage you're showing. What would be a big gift to me is if you would share what is alive with you right now in relationship to me. Just say what's going on however you want to.

UF: I have a real ethical problem with you. You weren't honest with me or reliable when our parents were declining. When I reached out to you to try and work it out, you were unwilling. You just wanted to put the past behind us. That's what you've always done, our whole life. You say it's my problem; you don't want to deal with it. Whatever is upsetting to me doesn't seem to matter.

MBR: You've said a lot to me here, a lot of different feelings: Let me check to be sure I understand fully. I'm hearing a lot of anger connecting to a need you may have had for more support when our parents were declining. Did I hear that much right?

UF: Yes.

MBR: So that was real, and you'd like some understanding now about how difficult this was for you to go through, how you would've really loved support . . . but not only didn't you get that support that you would've liked, but I'm also hearing that some of the things that I did since then in relationship to family matters have left you with a great deal of pain . . . that you would have really liked us to have made those decisions differently . . .

UF: Yeah.

MBR: Yeah . . . especially since it wasn't the only time you've experienced that your own needs weren't given the consideration you would've liked. Did I hear your message accurately?

UF: Yeah, yeah.

MBR: Do you like me when I'm wearing empathy ears?

UF: Yes! Will you be my brother?

MBR: So, still wearing these ears, I'd like to hear whatever else is still alive, still going on in you.

UF: You say you want us to get back together, but I just can't. We just don't resolve conflicts in the family, and I don't want to live like that any more.

MBR: So, if I hear your need, it's to protect yourself from the pain that you've felt in the past when you've reached out and tried to resolve things and it didn't happen. At this point you've had enough of that. It's as if part of you would like to hear from me, but not if it means going through the pain that you've felt in the past.

UF: Right. I'm still left in a quandary, because I can't see it working either way. If I go back, it's not going to be good for me, but then just staying away seems unnatural.

MBR: So, you're really torn. You have two needs. One need is for there to be reconciliation and healing between us. The other is this strong need to protect yourself. You don't know how to meet both needs.

UF: Right.

MBR: That's a real painful conflict.

UF: Right.

MBR: Anything else, Sister, that you'd like me to hear before I react to what you've said?

UF: No.

MBR: Hearing you now, with these empathy ears on, I feel a deep,

deep sadness, because I can see that I have not met my own needs with some of the things that I've done in our relationship: my need to nurture you in the way that I'd like, to contribute to your well-being. When I see how my actions have just the opposite effect, how it's created so much pain for you, I feel a deep sadness . . . and I'm very vulnerable right now . . . I'd like to hear how you feel when I tell you about this sadness.

UF: You're probably in the same quandary that I am, in the sense that you don't know how to meet my needs without being highly uncomfortable yourself . . .

MBR: I want to thank you for anticipating that, and what I'd really like right now is for you to just hear how sad I feel that I didn't get my need met to contribute to your well being as I would've liked.

UF: I appreciate that.

MBR: Now, what I would like to do is tell you what was going on in me when I did those things in our relationship. And—I think you've already somewhat anticipated this—I'd like to make it as clear as I can. First, about not providing more support for your efforts in dealing with the stress around our parents when they were declining: I had an inner message telling me that I really should help, and that I was a rat for not giving more support. And then because I was feeling so guilty, I wasn't able to hear your pain and your needs with my compassionate listening ears. Your requests were sounding too much like a demand on me. I was torn because I wanted to help, but I was also angry hearing a demand. I felt guilty, and I just didn't know how to handle all of those feelings going on in me except to try to avoid the whole issue. I'd like to know how you feel when I tell you that.

UF: It makes sense . . . clarifies things.

MBR: So then, just as you have some hurt in relationship to me, I have some hurt that I haven't known how to express to you about things that have happened in the past. I wish I could've known how to talk about it, but having that hurt inside and not knowing how to express it made it come out angry towards

you at times. I wish I could have expressed it differently. So, how do you feel when I tell you that?

UF: Good to hear.

MBR: So, is there anything else that you'd like me to hear or you want to say, or that you want to hear from me?

UF: I guess I'd want to know how to work through this in a way that is comfortable enough for each of us. Then we can move forward. It's a mess that has to be cleaned up. And I'm willing to hear whatever you have to say, to open the dialogue.

MBR: (Still role playing) I have an idea. Tell me how this feels to you: How about asking the folks who are recording this workshop to send me a copy of this as a start? And then maybe call me and ask me if I'd like to continue this kind of dialogue, maybe with the help of a third party?

UF: Yeah, I think that's an excellent idea.

MBR: Okay, let's do it. (END OF ROLE PLAY)

UF: Thank you.