

# *Language of the Heart*



## *Introduction*

The following is excerpted from a 1999 Keynote Address to the National Conference of Montessori Educators, given by Marshall Rosenberg in San Diego, California. In it he describes the basic features of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), and offers illustrations of how they might be used in school, at work, and in everyday life. In particular, Marshall describes the language of giraffes and jackals, the vocabulary of feelings and needs, the difference between observation and evaluation and between requests and demands, the role of power, punishment, and the vital skill of empathic connection.

In many countries Nonviolent Communication is popularly known as “Giraffe Language.” Marshall picked the Giraffe, the land animal with the largest heart, as a symbol for NVC, a language that inspires compassion and joyful relationships in all areas of life. As a language that stresses the expression of feelings and needs, NVC invites vulnerability and transforms it into strength.

Marshall often uses a Jackal puppet to represent that part of ourselves that thinks, speaks, or acts in ways that disconnect us from our awareness of our feelings and needs, as well as the feelings and needs of others. “Jackal” language makes it very hard for a person who uses it to get the connection they want with others, making life much less wonderful than it otherwise could be. The NVC practice is to recognize and befriend “Jackals” by receiving those less-than-life-enriching thoughts and habits compassionately—and free from moral judgment—while we retrain ourselves to experience life in increasingly more wonderful ways. In this booklet the word “Giraffe” is used interchangeably with NVC—and may also refer to a practitioner of NVC—while “Jackal” refers to thinking and speaking in ways that do not reflect the practices of NVC.

• • •

This is a great thrill for me to be here today and share some ideas with you. I'm glad to do it to give something back, because I'm very grateful for what my children received from Montessori education. They received many gifts. One of the gifts they received was to be exposed at a very young age to other languages. And I don't think it's accidental that as a result of that my oldest son is now head of a language program teaching English as a Second Language in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and my youngest son is now about to get his doctorate in Spanish, and will accompany me next month when we begin a new project in Colombia, as my translator. So it's a great joy for me to share with you some things that I hope will contribute to your teaching and your personal lives as well.

I'm interested in learning that's motivated by reverence for life, that's motivated by a desire to learn skills, to learn new things that help us to better contribute to our own well-being and the well-being of others.

And what fills me with great sadness is any learning that I see motivated by coercion. By coercion I mean the following: Any student that's learning anything out of a fear of punishment, out of a desire for rewards in the form of grades, to escape guilt or shame, or out of some vague sense of "ought" or "must" or "should." Learning is too precious, I believe, to be motivated by any of these coercive tactics.

So I have been interested in studying those people that have the ability to influence people to learn, but learning again that is motivated by this reverence for life, and not out of some coercive tactics.

And one of the things that I've found by studying such people is that they spoke a language that helps people to learn motivated by reverence for life.