

## 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 Rosenberg<sup>1</sup> 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.