

SPEAK PEACE

IN A
WORLD OF
CONFLICT

What **You** Say Next
Will Change **Your** World

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INTRODUCTION

*“We need a more peaceful world,
growing out of more peaceful families and
neighborhoods and communities. To secure and
cultivate such peace, we must love others, even
our enemies as well as our friends.”*

— HOWARD W. HUNTER



I AM GRATEFUL FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE WITH YOU the purpose and principles of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and give you examples of how it's being used by people throughout the world on a number of different levels. I'll show you how it's being used within ourselves, as well as how it's used to create quality connections with others at home, at work, and in efforts toward social change.

Speaking peace is communicating without violence, the practical outcome of applying the principles of Nonviolent Communication. It is a giving and a receiving of messages that center on two very important questions: *What's alive in us?* and *What can we do to make life more wonderful?*

Speaking peace is a way of connecting with others that allows our natural compassion to flourish. Around the world—from troubled families to dysfunctional bureaucracies

to war-ravaged countries—I’ve found no more effective means of getting to a peaceful resolution of conflict. In fact, speaking peace using Nonviolent Communication offers the promise of reducing or even eliminating conflict in the first place.

*Bringing about
peaceful change
begins with
working on our
own mind-sets.*



For most of us the process of bringing about peaceful change begins with working on our own mind-sets, on the way we view ourselves and others, on the way we get our needs met. This basic work is in many ways the most challenging aspect of

speaking peace because it requires great honesty and openness, developing a certain literacy of expression, and overcoming deeply ingrained learning that emphasizes judgment, fear, obligation, duty, punishment and reward, and shame. It may not be easy, but the results are worth the effort.

Part I of this book focuses on the mechanics of the process of NVC by posing two basic questions, the answers to which not only form an excellent overview of NVC but will also give you a sense of the differences between NVC and your current understanding of how to resolve differences. Applying NVC to

*Everything we do
is in service of
our needs.*



your life, to your relationships, and to your broader efforts toward peaceful resolution of conflict will almost certainly involve some fairly significant changes in how you view the world and operate within it.

For example, one basic concept in NVC—that everything we do is in service of our needs—has no corollary in mainstream thinking. When this one concept is applied to our view of others, we’ll see that we have no real enemies, that what others do to us is the best possible thing they know to do to get their needs met.

We can help them see more effective, less damaging ways to do it, but we don’t blame them, shame them, or hate them for not being what we want them to be. Far from leaving us powerless or requiring us to overpower others to get our needs met, speaking peace with NVC employs a tactic we call “power with.”

Part II of this book discusses changes that take place in ourselves, in our view of others, and in how we view the world when our motivation is to enrich life.

Part III supports your attempts at speaking peace by providing more advanced feedback on applying NVC to social change. I encourage you to team up with others who have similar values, to talk about how to do that, and to share thoughts on how to get your needs met when dealing with people who are less than receptive to your efforts.

In addition to what might be called “political” change, we’ll also look at applying NVC to other areas of society, such as business or school settings. It’s no coincidence that NVC is designed in such a way that the basic process of connecting with others—making clear observations, expressing and receiving feelings and needs, and making clear requests—remains effective no matter what social-change effort you apply it to.

ORIGINS OF NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION

*“I object to violence because when it appears
to do good, the good is only temporary;
the evil it does is permanent.”*

— M.K. GANDHI

I started looking at new forms of communication because of a couple of questions that had been in my mind since childhood. My family moved to Detroit, Michigan, just in time for the race riots of 1943. In our neighborhood thirty people were killed in about four days. We had to stay in the house those four days; we *couldn't* go out. This was a very powerful education for me as a boy. It was a painful education but one that brought to my awareness the idea that this is a world where people might want to hurt you because of the color of your skin.

*What is it that
gets into people
that makes them
want to harm
people?*



Then when I went to school for the first time, I found out that my last name could be a stimulus for people wanting to do violence to me. So it was on my mind repeatedly as a child growing up: What is it that gets into people that makes them want to harm people for such reasons as their name,

their religion, their background, or their skin color?

Fortunately, I was also exposed to the other side of human beings. For example, my grandmother was totally

paralyzed, and my mother was caring for her. And each evening an uncle of mine would come to our house to help my mother care for my grandmother. The whole time he was cleaning her up and feeding her, he had the most beautiful smile on his face.

So as a boy I kept wondering: How come there are people like my uncle who seem to enjoy contributing to the well-being of other people and at the same time other human beings who want to do violence to one another? When it came time to make a decision about what kind of work I wanted to do, I thought I would like to study these pivotal questions.

Initially I chose clinical psychology to find out what I could about those two questions. I ended up with a doctorate, but there were some limits to what I was taught that didn't answer the questions as well as I would have liked. I was more interested in learning how we were meant to live and what moves people away from their violent tendencies. I studied on my own after graduate school to try to find out what I could about why people like my uncle enjoy contributing to the well-being of others and why other people seem to enjoy making others suffer.

*Our nature:
contributing to
one another's
well-being.*



I came to what I'll be sharing with you from a number of different directions. The main one was studying the people I really admired to see what made them different. Why did they enjoy contributing to people's well-being even when they were involved in or in the middle of conflicting

situations in which people around them were behaving in a destructive way.

I talked to people like that, looked at them, and learned what I could from them about what they had learned. I looked at what helped them stay with what I really think is our nature: contributing to one another's well-being. I studied comparative religions to see if I could learn some things from the basic religious practices. These religions seemed to agree somewhat about how we are meant to live. Certain research—like that of Carl Rogers studying characteristics of healing relationships—was also very helpful to me.

From all of these sources I put together a process based on my desire for how I would like human beings to behave. If I can clarify for you the *purpose* of the process I was looking for, then it will make the mechanics of the process come more alive. That's because Nonviolent Communication is really an integration of a certain spirituality with concrete tools for manifesting this spirituality in our daily lives, our relationships, and our political activities. Therefore, I'd like to begin by clarifying the spiritual consciousness I was trying to serve by looking for the skills I'll be discussing later.

PURPOSE OF NVC

*“Teach this triple truth to all: A generous heart,
kind speech, and a life of service and compassion
are the things which renew humanity.”*

— THE BUDDHA

The spirituality embodied in NVC exists not so much to help people connect with the divine as to come from the divine energy we’re created out of, our natural life-serving energy. It’s a living process to keep us connected to the life within our self and the life that’s going on in other people.

Milton Rokeach, a research psychologist at Michigan State University, studied eight of the basic religions on the planet to see if, in any one of them, the people who seriously practiced the religion were more compassionate than others. He found that the eight he studied were about equal in compassion.

But then he compared them to people who had no religious affiliation—and the people with no religious affiliation were far more compassionate! He warned the reader, however, to be careful how one interprets these findings because within each religion there are two distinctly different populations. If you separated out a minority group (I think it was about 12 percent) from the majority, this small minority was far more compassionate than the non-churchgoing people.

For example, I was working in a village in Palestine and, at the end of a session, a young man said to me, “Marshall, I

really liked your training, but you know, this is nothing new, and I don't mean this as a criticism: It's really just applied Islam."

He saw me smiling and said, "Why do you smile?"

I said, "Yesterday I was in Jerusalem, and an orthodox rabbi told me it was applied Judaism. And the head of our program in Sri Lanka is a Jesuit priest, and he thinks it's Christianity."

So the spirituality of that minority from each of the religions is very close to that which Nonviolent Communication is intending to serve.

*NVC is a
combination of
thinking and
language.*



NVC is a combination of thinking and language, as well as a means of using power designed to serve a specific intention. This intention is to create the quality of connection with other people and oneself that allows compassionate giving to take place. In this sense it is a spiritual practice: All actions are taken for the sole purpose of willingly contributing to the well-being of others and ourselves.

The primary purpose of Nonviolent Communication is to connect with other people in a way that enables giving to take place: compassionate giving. It's compassionate in that our giving comes willingly from the heart. We are giving service to others and ourselves—not out of duty or obligation, not out of fear of punishment or hope for a reward, not out of guilt or shame, but for what I consider

part of our nature. It's in our nature to enjoy giving to one another. Nonviolent Communication helps us connect with one another by allowing our nature to come forward in how we give (and are given to) by others.

When some people hear that I think it's our nature to enjoy giving, they wonder, I'm sure, whether I'm a little bit naïve and unaware of all the violence in the world. How can you think it's our nature to enjoy compassionate giving with what's happening in the world? Believe me, I see the violence. I work in places like Rwanda, Israel, Palestine, and Sri Lanka.

While I'm well aware of all the violence, I don't think that's our nature. In every place I work, I ask people to think of something they've done within the last twenty-four hours that in some way has contributed to making life more wonderful for somebody. After they think a minute I ask, "Now, how do you feel when you are aware of how that act contributed to making life more wonderful for somebody?" And they all have a smile on their face. It's universal; most people enjoy giving to others.

*Nothing is more
enjoyable than
using our efforts
in the service
of life.*



When we are aware of the power we have to enrich life, how we can serve life, it feels good. I often follow up with the question, "Can anybody think of anything that's more fulfilling in life than to use our efforts this way?" I've asked this question all over our planet, and everyone seems to agree. There's nothing that is better, nothing that *feels* better,

nothing that's more enjoyable than using our efforts in the service of life by contributing to one another's well-being.

Well, if that is so, then how come the violence? Well, I believe that *the violence comes because of how we were educated, not because of our nature*. I agree with the theologian Walter Wink, who believes that since the dawn of civilization—at least eight thousand years—we have been educated in a way that makes violence enjoyable. This kind of education gets us disconnected from our compassionate nature.

And why were we educated this way? That's a long story. I won't go into it here except to say that it started long ago with myths about human nature that framed humans as basically evil and selfish—and that the good life is heroic forces crushing evil forces. We've been living under this destructive mythology for a long time, and it comes complete with a language that dehumanizes people and turns them into objects.

We have learned to think in terms of moralistic judgments of one another. We have words in our consciousness like *right, wrong, good, bad, selfish, unselfish, terrorists, freedom fighters*. And connected to these judgments is a concept of justice based on what we “deserve.” If you do bad things, you deserve to be punished. If you do good things, you deserve to be rewarded.

*NVC brings us
closer to our
nature.*



Unfortunately, we have been subjected to this consciousness, this faulty education, for a long, long time. I think that's the core of violence on our planet.

Nonviolent Communication, by contrast, is an integration of thought,

language, and communication that I think brings us closer to our nature. It helps us to connect with one another so we come back to what is really the fun way to live, which is contributing to one another's well-being. As I show you how to apply this process within ourselves, our relationships, and in social-change efforts, I've provided exercises throughout the book to help you interact with the ideas you're learning—and even apply them as you go along.

For example, let's begin by having you think of a situation that's current in your life in which somebody is behaving in a way that isn't making life wonderful for you. This could range all the way from a minor irritation they created to something major that's bothering you about how this person behaves. But pick a real situation, and I'll show you how Nonviolent Communication can support you in creating a connection in that situation that will end with everybody's needs getting met, with the people involved acting solely for the purpose of enriching life for one another, which certainly includes meeting our own needs. Now, if you have the person in mind, we'll see how Nonviolent Communication serves us.

Wherever I do workshops around the world it seems like there's always one parent who has a two- or three-year-old they want to work on. And what is the behavior that this child does that drives them nuts? The child says horrible things like "No" when they want the child to do something.

"Please put your toys back in the toy box."

"No."

Some people tell me they live with partners who say

horrible things like, “That hurts me when you do that.”

And some of the people I work with have much more serious issues, and they want to see how Nonviolent Communication can apply. In places like Rwanda, people might want to know, “How do I deal with my next-door neighbor when I know they killed a member of my family?”

EXERCISE:

If you would like to get a practical understanding of the Nonviolent Communication process, I suggest that you participate in the exercises placed throughout this book. Each exercise builds on the work you'll do in the previous one. To get the benefit of this experience, you can begin by thinking of an interaction with another person that hasn't gone in a way you enjoy and where you would like to learn how to speak peace.

Whatever circumstance you can recall at the moment, big or not so big, write it down or make a mental note of it: one specific thing that this person does that makes life less than wonderful for you. It could be something they do, something they don't do, or something they say or don't say. Now that you have noted something that this person does that you don't like, keep this in mind as you read the overview of how to apply Nonviolent Communication when you communicate with this person.

CHAPTER · 1

THE TWO QUESTIONS

*“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs.
Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and
go do that, because what the world needs
is people who have come alive.”*

— DR. HOWARD THURMAN



NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION KEEPS OUR ATTENTION focused on two critical questions.

Question number one: What’s alive in us? (Related questions are: What’s alive in me? What’s alive in you?) Now, this is a question that all over the planet people ask themselves when they get together. They don’t necessarily use those exact words. In English they often say it this way: How are you? Every language has its own way of asking, of course, but however it’s said, it’s a very important question.

We say it as a social ritual, but it’s a very important question because, if we’re to live in peace and harmony, if we’re to enjoy contributing to each other’s well-being, we

*NVC shows
us how to connect
with what's alive.*



need to know what's alive in each other. Sadly, though most people ask the question, not many people really know how to answer it very well because we haven't been educated in a language of life.

We've not really been taught to answer the question. We ask it, yes, but we don't know how to answer it. Nonviolent Communication, as we'll see, suggests how we can let people know what's alive in us. It shows us how to connect with what's alive in other people, even if they don't have words for saying it. So, that's the first question that Nonviolent Communication focuses our attention on.

The second question—and it's linked to the first—is: What can we do to make life more wonderful? (Related questions are: What can you do to make life more wonderful for me? What can I do to make life more wonderful for you?) So these two questions are the basis of Nonviolent Communication: What's alive in us? What can we do to make life more wonderful?

Now, just about everybody who studies Nonviolent Communication says two things about it. First, they say how easy it is, how simple. All we have to do is keep our communication, our focus of attention, our consciousness, on what's alive in us, what would make life more wonderful. How simple. The second thing they say is how difficult it is.

Now, how can something be so simple and so difficult at

the same time? Well, I've already given you a hint about that. It's difficult because we've been programmed to think and communicate in a quite different way. We haven't been taught to think about what's alive in us.

So, if we have been educated to fit under structures in which a few people dominate the many, we have been taught to think more of what people—especially authority figures—think of us. The reason is that if they judge us as bad, wrong, incompetent, stupid, lazy, or selfish, we're going to get punished. And if they label us as good little boys and girls, good students, and good employees, then we might be rewarded. We've been educated to think in terms of rewards and punishment instead of what's alive in us and what would make life more wonderful.

*We've been
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Let's go back to the situation I asked you to think about where somebody is behaving in a way you don't like. Let's look at how Nonviolent Communication suggests that we let that person know what's alive in us in relationship to what they're doing. We want to be honest in Nonviolent Communication, but we want to be honest without using words that imply wrongness, criticism, insult, judgment, or psychological diagnosis.