

On the Front Line

Meet Marshall Rosenberg, quiet revolutionary

BY D. KILLIAN

Based on cover endorsements from John Gray and Jack Canfield (*Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*), Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion* sounds like another New Age, self-help book. Yet like Noam Chomsky — who deconstructed language and then moved on to media and politics — Rosenberg's work is intrinsically radical. Beginning by addressing language, it subverts our whole status-quo system of power: between children and adults, the sane and the psychotic, the criminal and the law.

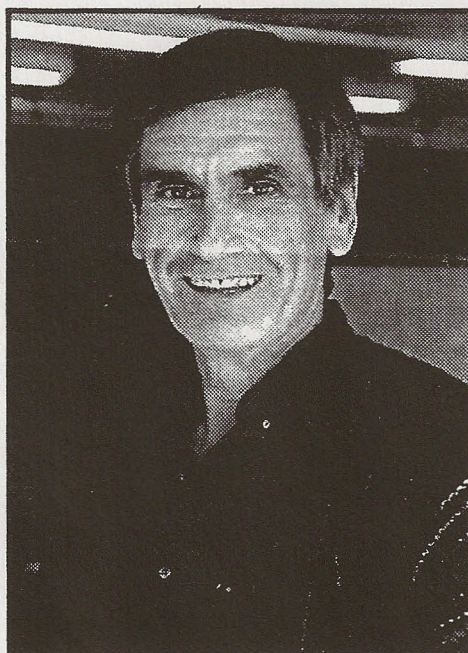
Rosenberg starts with a question: "What happens to disconnect us ... leading us to behave violently and exploitively?" In answering, he gives his own story — from surviving race riots and anti-semitism in Detroit to his training as a clinical psychologist. Ultimately, like the philosopher Michel Foucault, he explores the relationship between "power and knowledge" — the way discourse is complicit in oppression. Cracking the code, he gives a pragmatic method of identifying feelings, values and needs, illustrating the judgmental language and the power relationships dominating every level of our society.

Not just theoretical, Rosenberg shows NVC at work — often dramatically — from dealing with racists in America to surviving attacks in Palestine simply for being an American. Well-written and laid out, with cartoon illustrations, transcripts from actual dialogues and a summary of main points in the margins, *Nonviolent Communication* is accessible and easy to read — perhaps deceptively so. Especially in the latter half of the book, Rosenberg makes some challenging points: that compliments and apologies also operate in a system of oppression; that rewards are as harmful as punishment; that, as violence goes, killing is the easy way out. Making the personal political, he takes to task parenting, political activists, corporations, the prison system, education and psychology — which, years after he finished his training, he still finds harmful in its emotional distancing, diagnosis and hierarchy. His distinction between "punitive" and "protective" force — and how to discern when force is necessary — should be required reading for anyone making U.S. foreign policy or policing our streets.

Demanding the ultimate form of responsibility — and vulnerability — it's no wonder that, like Chomsky, Rosenberg has received relatively little media and mass attention. Perhaps in future studies, he will

further explore the implications of his work — especially for superstructures such as international relations, institutionalized racism, capital punishment and how his work bridges the spiritual and the political. But meanwhile, with all hype aside, the self-help diva Jack Canfield is probably right: "the principles and techniques in this book can literally change the world."

For the last 35 years, Rosenberg has been on the front line teaching conflict resolution in hot spots around the world.



Marshall Rosenberg.

For the last 13 years, in Cleveland, he's been creating a quiet revolution: teaching his method of "compassionate listening" in more than a hundred different colleges, churches, hospitals, museums and schools. According to Rita Herzog, director of the Cleveland Center for Nonviolent Communication and co-editor of Rosenberg's new book, he has conducted more NVC training in Cleveland than in any other U.S. city, except for San Diego.

Next week he will sign his new book at Borders in Beachwood on Thursday, March 18. The following are excerpts of a phone interview with Rosenberg while he was at work in Sweden.

Free Times: In your book, you say that "judgments are tragic expressions of unmet needs." So where does that leave ethics and morality?

Marshall Rosenberg: We need judgments. Every living creature needs "need" judgments. I tried to give a dog an apple the other day, and he looked at me as

though I were crazy. Obviously, we need to know whether what we eat is poison or not. We need to make need judgments continually in our lives — but keep those different from moralistic judgments. Every major religion has been saying this for centuries: judge not others. They're talking about moralistic judgments.

FT: Statistically, men are much more violent than women — are they just poor communicators?

MR: Men are more violent to other people. Women are more violent to themselves.

FT: Your method of conflict resolution is called "non-violent communication," but most people would consider language an alternative to violence, not a form of it.

MR: Well, I define violence in many different ways. There's institutional or systematic violence: the American judicial system is very violent — it discriminates on the basis of class and race. Then we can talk about physical violence, the one that most people think of — but not what I consider the most dangerous. And the physical is almost always based on the psychological, where you dehumanize the person with your language — implying some kind of badness, wrongness or inappropriateness. You define people with having the kind of badness as deserving to suffer. This is the most destructive concept ever invented by humanity: the concept of deserve.

FT: You talk about anger being a state of mind — a result of our thinking. But if you're not making a living wage or are being discriminated against for the color of your skin or the gender of the person you sleep with — injustice is not just in your head.

MR: It's not injustice. It's not meeting our needs for justice. If you are clear that your need isn't being met, you're much more likely to take action to get your need met. If you judge it as an injustice, it's "wrong," then you're going to take a violent action.

FT: U.S. foreign policy seems to be always punitive.

MR: Our leaders do not know the difference between the protective and the punitive. As we just saw, the right wing wanted to punish Clinton. They weren't trying a protective use of force — to protect the morals of the country. They weren't interested in that. They were interested in punishing ... and punishment not only never works, it almost always creates enormous pain for whoever's using it.