



**George F. Simons**

Toward the end of the 1970's, while at the Gestalt Institute San Diego, a colleague gave me a list of tips about language that came from a local group calling itself the Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC). I found the list both intriguing and helpful, and I tried to practice it. About 25 years later I discovered the book about it by Marshall Rosenberg and I was both delighted to reconnect with the NVC movement and also curious as to how the passage of so much time might have their work and my attitudes.

In the passing years, I had changed my shifted away from humanistic and traditional psychology and let my thinking go in the direction of linguistics and cognitive science. I delved into intercultural studies and did lots of working abroad. This distanced me to some degree from my narrow US thinking and made me reexamine ideas and movements that I had formerly swallowed whole.

Treated to a review copy of the Center's latest edition of *Nonviolent Communication*, I ate it up, my appetite whetted by years of waiting. At the same time I attempted to critique it with the palate I had developed since I had last tasted it. What did I discover?

First, then as now, I was reminded that NVC remains an act of courage, courage to confront self and others with both honesty and empathy. This has not become easier in a culture that, from kindergarten to White House, seems to value shooting from the hip followed up by cover-your-ass strategies.

Other important insights emerged. For years I had been uneasy with assertiveness training where a constantly whining, "You make me feel..." tone under the formula "When you do/say X, I feel Y." People were learning assertive scripts but practicing them punitively, that is, without the regard that would allow them to become constructive. It is this regard that is at the core of NVC. Life is frequently made up of competing and getting, and trying to look good as we claw our way to the top. Ambition tempts us to put imitate trendy ways of communicating so we can look good and be liked.

Being positive is an essential demand in today's US culture. Put another way, the quickest route to becoming an outcast in both work and with friends is to fail to be positive. Make negative judgments, fail to look on the bright side, criticize, complain, or mourn your failures and no one listens or even worse no one wants to be around you. So, we develop a positive surface layer—positive feedback, lots of encouragement, and a steady diet of "atta' boy/atta' girl" language. Negativity is bad, violent, and destructive. "Blessed are the positive!" is beatitude in US civil religion.

Plenty of non-US folk had been telling me that they felt attacked and aggressed upon by US "positivity." My initial temptation was to dismiss their complaint as negativity or pessimism. However, listening to what they felt, I learned that having a positive attitude was not itself the

problem. They felt that they were being judged, that their US interlocutor was taking a one-up or arrogant stance toward them. I had overlooked the fact that both positive and negative evaluations can be violent communication forms. Both play into our US addiction to dichotomous thinking and our love of passing moral judgment on the other guy. We fail to notice that saying, "Great job," or, "You screwed up," are identical acts of violence. What people get is the message, "I judge you," whether the judgment be positive or negative. As long as it is positive we swallow it, but let it be critical...

Being positive can also be a power play used to beat up someone who disagrees with our ideas or plans. Criticize me, or look on the negative side of what I am doing or saying, and you are no longer my friend. This happens every day, and recently saw it writ large, in US policy toward those countries that refused to support the US invasion of Iraq.

Should we be surprised that there is a national crisis of self-esteem when empowerment based on judgment is a norm of communication? Self-esteem comes from acknowledged accomplishment and a growing sense of one's own competence, something that no number of feel-good strokes can replace. Particularly since US folk believe they are what they do, there is an insatiable thirst for identity via accomplishment. Respect, not being "dissed," is the yearning; positivity is the sugar pill. In this light, NVC can be without question an important tool for healing in the USA, as it teaches the attitudes as well as the practices that help us genuinely respect others as well as ourselves.

In the past 50 or so years we have become aware that it is with language that we create things. Construct and deconstruct reality with words. We use them to create powerful visions and dreams. But the words create illusions unless they are backed up by what we do and how we relate to each other. Power leads us to imagine that when we say, "Let there be light," there will be light. However, being only human, our sound bites and adverts, propaganda and spin require a closer more critical look, something they rarely get in the fog of okayness we try to maintain. When Richard Nixon uttered his famous denial of dishonesty by saying, "What I said then is now inoperative," a lot of us got our first clue that big lies could happen here as well as elsewhere in the world. NVC is a call to use the creative power of words with compassion and honesty as individuals. Much still needs to be done to see how NVC can be more broadly applied in public life.

The need to decide who is good and who is evil, to judge, and then to act, drives us to a stark "good guys vs. bad guys" view of reality, personal, economic and political. Rosenberg astutely notes how we, "having learned that the bad guys deserve to be punished, take pleasure in watching this violence." It is this addiction to violence and vengeance that we are struggling with daily as, particularly since 9/11 when political, religious and economic stress seem always in our face. Feeling self-righteousness tempts us to delight in others' misfortune almost anywhere and anytime—especially if we see them as the bad guys. Mastering NVC can keep us from turning observations and desires into take-it-or-leave-it confrontations, and help us prevent the brush fires of disagreement from becoming deadly wildfires.

If you want to take the plunge into NVC, lay your hands on a copy of Marshall Rosenberg's book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* at your local books store or directly from [www.puddledancer.com](http://www.puddledancer.com). The book is highly readable, value for the money. Each chapter gives you the chance to test what you are learning by asking you to check a list of statements in terms of their non-violent quality. The book includes occasional poetry and quotes that remind

us that there is beauty in what we are learning to practice. Key insights are highlighted so that you can flip through the book for a refresher course in a few minutes.

It will be good for the world's trouble spots to know that *Nonviolent Communication* and not just tear gas canisters and weapons bear the cachet "Made in the USA."