The Heart of Social Change

How to Make a Difference in *Your* World

A transcript of a Nonviolent Communication™ workshop given by

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Introduction

This booklet contains excerpts from a workshop given by Marshall Rosenberg in San Diego in May, 2000, and serves as an introduction to his wisdom on effective social change. In narrative commentary and role-play, he returns our focus to basic questions: What is at the root of any social problem? What needs am I meeting in getting involved? What do we need to affect change?

From the manner in which we communicate, to the intention we bring to every interaction and the organization structures we support, social change "begins with me." Marshall shows how Nonviolent Communication can help you create an internal culture of peace that will help you effect lasting social change. In the role-plays participants are identified as UF (unidentified female participant), UM (unidentified male participant), and MBR (Marshall B. Rosenberg). All other words are Marshall's. We pick up the conversation with a question from one of the participants in the workshop.

Striving for Systems Change

UM: I'm just curious, what can we do to change the source of social problems instead of dealing with the symptoms of all the problems, to get to the root of where all this is coming from? What can we do to change what happened

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eight thousand years ago, or maybe duplicate it in a compassionate way so that we can change it in the next eight thousand?

MBR: First, I can tell you a strategy that I'm trying to follow myself—the best that I've found at this point. It's this: change the paradigm within myself, to liberate myself from the way I was programmed and to be in harmony with how I choose to live, with how I reflect the story that resonates the most in my heart. In other words, I strive to create that chosen world within. Peace begins with me.

Next, I really like the paradigm that I've chosen. I've found out that it's nothing new. I was just told in British Columbia by some indigenous people that I was working with up there that they liked what I presented. They said, "You know, Marshall, this is just what our elders taught us," and I've been told by Palestinians I work with that what I've come up with as a new paradigm for myself is just Islam. What I've come up with works for me and also seems to be something that other people have chosen for their own paradigm. So let's do our best to share the new paradigm with others. That's one way to create social change. Share what works for us, what makes our life richer without blasting the old paradigm, without calling them a bunch of bigots . . . tell what we like about our story, and how it's enriched our life.

Then we can get clear what social structures would look like. What would gangs (see *The Concept of Gangs and Social Structures*, page 10) look like that function in harmony with the paradigm of our choosing? And how can we develop our skills to radically transform existing structures into ones that are in harmony with our paradigm?

Then I ask: What education is necessary for people to have our paradigm so that they can create other structures that resemble our paradigm? I'm trying to work in all four of these areas together.

That last one—education—is one I put a lot of energy into. I want to get the next generation of people around the world educated in a radically different paradigm, and

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with skills for creating structures that support the new paradigm. So, for example, we not only teach the kids in the school, we also set up Nonviolent Communication training with their parents, teachers, and administrators. And equally important is that the school is a reflection of the kind of government that we would like to see. It shows leaders as servants. Teachers are servants of the students; the administrators are servants of the teachers. Rewards and punishment are not used. The relationships among the student body are created as interdependent relationships, not as competitive ones. Tests are not given to determine grades. Tests are given to determine whether the teacher has done his or her job. They're not tests of the students; they're tests of the learning process. This is what my book *Life-Enriching Education* is about.

Paradigm Change Within Ourselves

Being Motivated to Enrich Life

Life-Enriching is the key concept in my paradigm: every action comes out of an image of seeing how human needs would be met by the action. That's the vision that mobilizes everything. A life-enriching organization is one in which all work in the organization, everything that every worker does, comes out of seeing how it's going to support life in the form of meeting needs—needs of the physical planet, trees, lakes, or human beings or animals—and it's clear how life will be served through meeting of needs. And that's the vision that inspires the actions, purely. In a life-enriching structure, nobody works for money. Money plays the same role as food for a mother who is breastfeeding her infant. She doesn't receive food as payment. The food is nurturance so she has the energy to serve life. It all boils down to human needs, which is why Nonviolent Communication is so rooted in the consciousness of needs. Everything we do is in the service of needs and the pleasure that is felt when needs are fulfilled, especially spiritual needs. Those are the most fun needs to fulfill.

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To me, the bees and the flowers are part of a life-enriching organization. Look at how they both meet each other's needs. They don't do it through any guilt, duty, or obligation, but naturally, in a natural system. The bee gets its nectar from the flower and it pollinates the flower.

On Needs

It is hard to separate meeting human needs from the needs of the environment: They are one and the same. Meeting the needs of all the phenomena on the planet. Seeing the oneness of it all. Seeing the beauty in that whole scheme, that whole interdependent scheme of life. Life-enriching structures—the kind of structures that I would like to see us creating and participating in—are structures whose vision is to serve life. And how do we know if an organization—whether it's a family, or work team, or government—is a life-serving organization? We find out by asking: Is its mission to meet the needs and enrich the lives of people within—and affected by—the organization?

And what do people need? Money is not a need. It's a strategy that sometimes might meet a need. Fame is not a need. Status is not a need. These are things that domination structures use to mislead people—take a real need and misrepresent it, and get people to think that these false things are the needs. So, a life-enriching organization, in fact, serves life, serves needs. Next, all work done within a life-enriching structure is motivated by the mission. Not by money, not by salary, not by position, not by status. Every bit of work that a person does is coming from this joy of meeting that mission. And life-enriching organizations give the workers within them the nurturing they need to live that mission. Now, here's where money comes into play. They might get a salary for some food for their family and themselves, but that's not why they're doing the work. They're motivated to do the work purely by the life-serving mission. But the most important part of an organization in this respect isn't the money. A life-enriching organization must be set up to be very good at getting genuine gratitude

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to every worker. That's the fuel necessary to keep people working in a life-enriching organization. Sincere gratitude. When you do so people can see how their efforts are instrumental in the life-serving mission.

My need is not to teach Nonviolent Communication. That's not a need. My need is for safety, fun, and to have distribution of resources, a sustainable life on the planet. Nonviolent Communication is a strategy that serves me to meet those needs. I look for ways to get both that other person's need met and my need met. I'm not trying to sell, I'm trying to get both needs met. So, my first job is to create the quality of connection where I see clearly what the other person's need is, and where they see what my need is. When the person trusts that I'm equally interested in their need as mine, 90 percent of the problem is over. Making a request of someone without getting to the need sounds like a sales job.

The Spiritual Basis of Social Change

MBR: Unless we as social change agents come from a certain spirituality, we're likely to create more harm than good. What I mean by spirituality is that, moment-by-moment, we're staying connected our own life and to the lives of others. And we can discover our spirituality by asking: What is the good life? What are we about? This quality of consciousness will help lead us to a life-enriching spirituality that helps us connect with ourselves and others at the heart level. We are all politically sophisticated, we know all the dangerous structures out there, we're very astute in seeing what's wrong with the world, and we're going to change it. If we do not first make a radical spiritual change within ourselves we're not going to be effective; in fact, we may even contribute to what's already going on.

So, yes, we're going to start with ourselves, but be careful because spirituality can be reactionary if we get people to just be so calm and accepting and loving that they tolerate the dangerous structures. The spirituality that we need to develop for social change is one that mobilizes

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us for social change. It doesn't just enable us to sit there and enjoy the world no matter what. It creates a quality of energy that mobilizes us into action. Unless our spiritual development has this quality, I don't think we can create the kind of social change I would like to see.

The spirituality that I try to live by is a very simple-minded spirituality. I used to get bored in all of my exposures to churches and synagogues, so I need a spirituality that is alive for me, that doesn't take many words. I like the way Joseph Campbell summarized it. Joseph Campbell is a gentleman who has written a lot about myths and comparative religions. He tried to get at what was beautiful in all religions, and he found that to his ears all of them were saying the same thing—and he liked what he heard them saying. And so what is his summary of spirituality? What all of the basic religions are saying is this: Don't do anything that isn't play.

I predict that when we have that—don't do anything that isn't play—in mind, we will see that the most fun game in the world is making life wonderful. How do you make life wonderful? Don't do anything that isn't play. Wait until it's play. And it'll be play at the moment our full consciousness is on a life-enriching vision. Then use your power in service of human and planetary needs. Use your power to enrich life by meeting needs.

Social change is liberating ourselves from any theology, from any spirituality that is not in harmony with what we believe will enable us to create the kind of world we would like. Get very clear about the kind of world we would like and then start living that way. As soon as we start living by a different spirituality we're already starting social change. You don't want to stop there, but the moment we live—and to whatever degree we live—a different spirituality, the social change begins.

The spiritual development of people largely determines the kind of world that people are going to create, the kind of social structures they're going to create. For example, the spiritual development that we need, as I understand

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spirituality, focuses on a few of questions: What is our nature as human beings? What are we about? What's the good life?

The spirituality that I was exposed to—the culture I grew up in—viewed the good life as punishing bad people. Good forces punishing bad forces. I would say this spirituality is still our number one spirituality. Children in our culture are exposed to it, especially from seven to nine at night when they're watching television shows. In 75 percent of those programs, the hero, the good guys, either kills someone or beats someone up. We can't blame the television for this spirituality; many holy books have been used to teach the same message. But I wanted to define my spirituality in a different way.

Sharing the Paradigm With Others, and Structural Change

On Quality of Connection

In the context of social change efforts, it is critical to create a quality of connection with people of whom we're requesting something. Each of us will seek to know exactly what the other person is feeling and needing. Most important is that the other person doesn't think our objective is to get them to do what we want. In order to get them to trust that, we need to be sure that *isn't* our objective. Use as few words as necessary to get the other person into a dialogue. Be careful of monologues; be careful of trying to sell ideas. Get a dialogue going. Let the other person direct you to what they need to hear.

With each person that we connect with make sure it is our objective to create a certain quality of connection with that person. It's not to get what we want. We're really trying to live a different value system, even in our social change efforts, which means, yes, we would like to ask for some things, but what's most important to us is every connection along the line. Does it mirror the kind of world

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we're trying to create? Each step in every bit of asking we do needs to reflect energetically what we're after. It's a holographic image of the structure we're trying to create. In short, the asking process needs to reflect the value system we're trying to support.

The Four Key Dimensions of SC

I think it will help me to show you the different ways in which we've been applying Nonviolent Communication to support our social change efforts and political activism by getting us all clear about four dimensions—four interacting issues—which for me are very important to have in my consciousness. They help me decide how I want to contribute to social change.

In the **first dimension**, there's what some people call the story. Other people call it the cultural myth or the basic paradigm. And essentially what is usually meant by this dimension is the answer to a couple very important questions: How were we meant to live, and what is our nature as human beings? All of that is this first dimension. And I think it's probably the most important dimension for social change. It's crucial that we understand the prevailing theme in any culture. How have people been educated to answer those questions? What is the good life? How shall we live? And what is our nature?

Drawing from Riane Eisler's work, author and theologian Walter Wink, in his book *The Powers That Be* and other writings, points out that about eight thousand years ago a new story came into being. A different kind of understanding than ever before of what the answer was to those two questions. About eight thousand years ago a myth started to develop that involved how the world began. How did our world begin? See? It began when a very heroic, virtuous male god crushed to smithereens a nasty female goddess, and out of that crushing of the evil force by the virtuous force, the energy created the earth. And however these things get started, it evolved then to become kind of general knowledge, a general understanding. It was passed

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down from generation to generation and answered this question of how the world began. Now, this is pretty well documented. We don't know where it started because it evolved over hundreds of years, but it gradually evolved and became this kind of history in people's minds about how the world began. It's not too surprising how this first dimension got answered and has been answered over about eight thousand years. How were we meant to live? And the answer to that is we were meant to live by crushing out evil forces. The good life is the virtuous forces crushing out the evil forces.

But don't worry, if you missed out on that story, if you didn't learn about it, then go back to your formal education. Most of us learned that story in American history. I was taught when I was a boy that the good forces—the United States—needed to crush the evil forces. America is the hero. Other countries have a similar history of being the good forces crushing the evil forces. If you don't want to go back to school, turn on the television or see a movie. In the majority of these the hero either kills somebody or beats them up. And when does this violence occur?

UF: At the climax.

MBR: At the climax. It's like a sexual joy we get, and that's another thing that Walter Wink says: Our culture requires making violence enjoyable. And if you really want to see how to make violence enjoyable go down to Texas whenever they're going to execute a criminal. Go outside the prison, and you'll see hundreds of college students gathering outside for tailgate parties. Hundreds of them, hundreds of them every time. They drink, and they're waiting for the magic moment. What is the magic moment? When over the loud speaker from the prison, "The prisoner has been executed," and there's wild, wild cheering.

See, that's the story, that's the good life. The good guys crushing the bad guys. Now, there's a little bit of a problem with that story. How do you decide who the good guys are? Well, after a while some people came up with a very

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creative idea. The good guys were the people whose families were closer to God than other families. They had what they called the divine right of God. It was their divine right to be kings because they're closer to God. Well, how do you know that your family is closer to God than others? Because I'm a King, yes, but how can you be sure? Have you seen the size of my army? Oh, yeah, yeah, I can see you're divine; I can see your divinity. So that's one way that people have described this story. Usually the good forces, the male forces, crush the evil forces, so, there needs to be a man at the top, because someone needs to say who's good and who's evil. That's the story that's pumped into everybody.

UM: You've got to have faith, you know?

MBR: You have to have faith, that's why these kings got the church involved. They got the church to work with them to define the divine rights of kings. So, you see, that's one dimension that's every important for social change. To understand the story that cultures try to pass down to people, because as we'll see, this is going to affect the next three dimensions.

The Concept of Gangs and Domination Structures

Now the **second dimension**, which is closely related to this, is gangs. What gangs are necessary for the story to be realized? What do I mean by gangs? I mean groups of people. In order for the story to be worked out, you have to make important decisions, how certain things are going to be done. Like, how are we going to distribute food to everybody? How are we going to protect everybody? These are important decisions. It's pretty hard for one person to make these decisions, so over the years we have developed organizations for doing the work that needs to be done for people to live in harmony with this story. So, you create gangs that are in harmony with the story. Now, what do these gangs call themselves? Some gangs call themselves gangs. Some gangs call themselves family. Some gangs

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call themselves school systems, governments, police, corporations. But they're groups of people, groups of people that get together to do things. But the story affects the gangs, because if you believe in that old story then you create top-down gangs, or domination structures. With the most virtuous male at the top of the ladder, of course.

MBR: What gangs have I belonged to? I've belonged to a family gang. I was a student in a school gang. I have been a member of the gang called the United States government—I played the role of citizen in that gang. I've been in many gangs. I started a gang called the Center for Nonviolent Communication. So, gangs, you see are largely affected by the story. You create gangs in harmony with what you understand is the nature of human beings. If you believe the story we've been told—that human beings are basically evil and selfish until they are crushed or controlled by the virtuous forces—then you have a person given the power to use punishment with people who are designated evil and to reward those who are good. They don't always use the words "good and evil," but then again—and we'll get into this a little bit later—they require a certain education to sustain themselves. Okay, so we have two dimensions so far, the story, the paradigm, the good life and the good guys crushing out the bad guys. Next are gangs, gangs created from that story. Basically, gangs are hierarchical structures.

If we're functioning in domination structures, as we develop a different spirituality—and to whatever degree we develop and live by a different spirituality—the whole thing shakes. But we need to go beyond that. We also need to transform the educational structures and make sure that education is as we would like it to be to support the kind of world we want. And then we need to change the gangs, we need to transform the gangs, to support the spirituality we want to support. But the spirituality has to be real clear because all social change evolves from that. That's what guides us: to know whether what's happening is in harmony with our spirituality or not.

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