

Teaching Children *Compassionately*

**How Students and Teachers Can
Succeed With Mutual Understanding**

*A Nonviolent Communication™
presentation and workshop transcription by*
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Language of the Heart



Introduction

The following is excerpted from a 1999 Keynote Address to the National Conference of Montessori Educators, given by Marshall Rosenberg in San Diego, California. In it he describes the basic features of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), and offers illustrations of how they might be used in school, at work, and in everyday life. In particular, Marshall describes the language of giraffes and jackals, the vocabulary of feelings and needs, the difference between observation and evaluation and between requests and demands, the role of power, punishment, and the vital skill of empathic connection.

In many countries, Nonviolent Communication is popularly known as “Giraffe Language.” Marshall picked the Giraffe, the land animal with the largest heart, as a symbol for NVC, a language that inspires compassion and joyful relationships in all areas of life. As a language that stresses the expression of feelings and needs, NVC invites vulnerability and transforms it into strength.

Marshall often uses a Jackal puppet to represent that part of ourselves that thinks, speaks, or acts in ways that disconnect us from our awareness of our feelings and needs, as well as the feelings and needs of others. “Jackal” language makes it very hard for a person who uses it to get the connection they want with others, making life much less wonderful than it otherwise could be. The NVC practice is to recognize and befriend “Jackals” by receiving those less-than-life-enriching thoughts and habits

compassionately—and free from moral judgment—while we retrain ourselves to experience life in increasingly more wonderful ways. In this booklet, the word *Giraffe* is used interchangeably with NVC—and may also refer to a practitioner of NVC—while *Jackal* refers to thinking and speaking in ways that do not reflect the practices of NVC.



On Jackals and Giraffes

This is a great thrill for me to be here today and share some ideas with you. I'm glad to do it to give something back, because I'm very grateful for what my children received from Montessori education. They received many gifts. One of the gifts they received was to be exposed at a very young age to other languages. And I don't think it's accidental that as a result of that, my oldest son is now head of a language program teaching English as a Second Language in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and my youngest son is now about to get his doctorate in Spanish, and will accompany me next month when we begin a new project in Colombia, as my translator. So it's a great joy for me to share with you some things that I hope will contribute to your teaching and your personal lives as well.

I'm interested in learning that's motivated by reverence for life, that's motivated by a desire to learn skills, to learn new things that help us to better contribute to our own well-being and the well-being of others.

And what fills me with great sadness is any learning that I see motivated by coercion. By coercion I mean the following: Any student that's learning anything out of a fear of punishment, out of a desire for rewards in the form of grades, to escape guilt or shame, or out of some vague sense of "ought" or "must" or "should." Learning is too precious, I believe, to be motivated by any of these coercive tactics.

So I have been interested in studying those people that have the ability to influence people to learn, but learning again that is motivated by this reverence for life, and not out of some coercive tactics.

And one of the things that I've found by studying such people is that they spoke a language that helps people to learn motivated by reverence for life.

As I've studied people who have this ability, I've noticed that they spoke a different language than the language that I was educated to speak. And this language that contributes to helping people learn by reverence for life I call, officially, Nonviolent Communication. But for fun and teaching purposes I like calling it "Giraffe Language."

Unfortunately, giraffe language is not the language that I was educated to speak. I did not go to Montessori schools. I went to "jackal" schools. And in jackal schools, as you might guess, the teachers spoke the language of jackal, not the language of giraffe. I hope none of you have ever heard the language of jackal. I wish it were outlawed in all schools throughout the world, but the teachers at the schools I went to spoke jackal.

So let me give you an idea of what a jackal-speaking teacher sounds like. Let's imagine that you are my students and I'm the teacher, and I happen to observe one of you doing something that's not in harmony with my values. I see you sitting at your seat, and instead of doing what I'm asking the class to do, you're drawing a picture of me with a knife in my back and blood spurting out.

Now, how do I evaluate you if I am a jackal-speaking teacher? It's obvious: You're emotionally disturbed. This is how jackal-speaking people have been trained to think. When there is a conflict, they think in terms of what is wrong with the person who's behaving in a way that is in conflict with their values.

Or let's say that you don't understand something I've said. "You're a slow learner." But what if you say some things that I don't understand? "You're rude and socially inappropriate."

What if I speak so rapidly you can't follow me? "You have an auditory problem." What if you speak so rapidly I can't follow you? "You have an articulation problem."

So you see, jackal education is a very strange experience. Let me give you an example of what happens in jackal schools. Imagine that you are a car salesman. And you're not selling any cars. Well, you fire the customers. That might seem like a strange experience, but in the jackal schools that I went to, that's what

happened. This language of jackal was the primary language used. And if you didn't measure up, you were not promoted, not rewarded, and so forth.

So I saw that the language that really helped people to teach in a way that I valued was a very different language from the language that I was educated to speak. And why did I call it giraffe language? Well, giraffes have the largest heart of any land animal. And, as I'll try to show you in our time together this morning, the language of Nonviolent Communication is a language of the heart. It requires knowing how to speak always from your heart, and since giraffes have the largest heart of any land animal, what better name for a language of the heart than "giraffe?"

Now, let me share with you this language of giraffe, or Nonviolent Communication, and I'll try to show you how it might apply in conflict resolution with students, or with other teachers or parents.

NVC requires us to be continually conscious of the beauty within ourselves and other people. There's a song I'd like to sing for you to help get us in the mood for understanding the mechanics of Nonviolent Communication. I would guess that many of you might already be familiar with this song. It was written by a couple named Red and Kathy Grammer, and some of the Montessori schools I've been working with lately have been using their music for teaching purposes. But I find that people I work with all around the world like this song. It's a song called, "See Me Beautiful."

"See Me Beautiful"

*Look for the best in me
That's what I really am
And all I want to be
It may take some time
It may be hard to find
But see me beautiful*

*See me beautiful
Each and every day
Could you take a chance*

*Could you find the way
To see me shining through
In everything I do
And see me beautiful¹*

So Nonviolent Communication is a way of keeping our consciousness tuned in moment by moment to that beauty within ourselves and others, and not saying anything that we think might in any way tarnish people's consciousness of their own beauty. Nonviolent Communication shows us a way of being very honest, but without any criticism, without any insults, without any put-downs, without any intellectual diagnosis implying wrongness. Because the more we use words that in any way imply criticism, the more difficult it is for people to stay connected to the beauty within themselves.

And Nonviolent Communication shows us a way of staying with that beauty in ourselves and with other people, even when *they* are not using Nonviolent Communication.

One of my happiest days as a parent was when the first of my children went to a non-Montessori school. My oldest son, Rick, when he was twelve, had graduated from the Montessori school, and now he was going for the first day to a school in our neighborhood. And I was wondering what it was going to be like for him, after spending his first six years in quite a different school.

So when he came home the first day I said, "Hey, Rick, how was the new school?" He was "underwhelmed." He said, "It's OK, Dad, but boy, some of those teachers." I said, "What happened?"

He said, "Dad, I wasn't even in the front door of the school, really, I was like halfway through the front door, and some man teacher comes running over to me and says, 'My, my, look at the little girl.'" You can probably guess what the teacher was reacting to. My son had hair down to his shoulders. Now, in a jackal school the teachers think that authority knows what's right. Isn't that a primitive idea? And they think the way to motivate people is through insults and criticism, to motivate by guilt and shame. So this was my son's introduction to the other world. So I said, "How did you handle it?"

He said, “I remembered what you said, Dad, that when you’re in that kind of institution, never give them the power to make you submit or rebel.” And I couldn’t have been more thrilled as a parent than that he had remembered that abstract but important message under those conditions. Never give people, or the institutions within which we live, the power to make you submit or rebel. So I said: “Well, gosh, I’m pleased that you remembered that. And how did you react to his statement?”

“Well,” he said, “Dad, I again did what you suggested that we do. I put on my giraffe ears.” Now this technology is superb, because it helps us to see the beauty in other people, regardless of their language. We don’t allow their words, or how they are communicating, to take us into a world that we don’t want to be in.

So as soon as we turn these ears on, that’s all we can hear. We don’t hear what’s coming out of a person’s mouth or their head. We see what’s in their heart.

So I said to him, “Well, gosh, again it makes me very pleased, Rick, that you remembered to try to hear the teacher in a human way when he was speaking that way.” Now, with these ears, all we can hear are feelings and needs, you see. That’s what’s in there, always, behind every message. That’s the basic vocabulary, the basic literacy of Nonviolent Communication: feelings and needs.

And you learn to hear the feelings and needs behind any message. So I said, “What did you hear when you put on your ears and you tried to hear his feelings and needs?” He said: “It was pretty obvious, Dad. I heard that he was feeling irritated, and probably wanted me to get my hair cut.”

I said, “How did it leave you feeling?” He said: “Dad, I felt sad for the man. He was bald and seemed to have a problem about hair.”

I was working with some eighth graders not long ago in the state of Washington, and I was showing them the trick that my son was demonstrating there. We were practicing to put these ears on. And they were telling me several things that their parents and teachers were saying that were hard to hear with these ears. And I was showing them how to connect with the beauty, to see the beauty in them.

And I said, “Now as soon as you put these ears on, you will

always hear the jackal singing the same song, ‘See Me Beautiful.’ I’ve gotten some feedback. I’ve created monsters in that school. Now the teachers tell me, whenever they scream at the children, they put their arms around one another and sing, “See Me Beautiful.”

Again, that’s the basic vocabulary of Nonviolent Communication: feelings and needs. There are a couple of other ingredients, too, but if you can learn to speak to feelings and needs, then it’s easier for other people to see our humanness. It’s easier for them to see the beauty in us. And when we are living Nonviolent Communication, all we can see is the feelings and needs of the other person.

Observation vs. Evaluation

I’m suggesting today that we never evaluate a student’s performance by any jackal language. Let’s get the following words out of our consciousness as teachers: right, wrong, good, bad, correct, incorrect, slow learner, fast learner. This is dangerous language.

Some teachers in one school system I was working with in the United States couldn’t imagine going through one day without using words that classify—right, wrong, good, bad, correct, incorrect. And they said, “How are we to evaluate performance?” They wanted me to show them how to do this using Nonviolent Communication. So I took over several classes for the day ranging from math classes to English to art classes, and they followed me around with a video camera so that this could be used to show the teachers how to evaluate performance in giraffe language rather than in jackal language. They had about four hours of videotape that we made. But this school system told me that they’d only used the first ten minutes for teachers training. They said: “That’s all we need, Marshall, to make the point. What happened in that first ten minutes was more than enough to convince our teachers to learn giraffe language and not to go into the class with jackal language.”

Now, what happened in that first ten minutes? I came across a young boy about age nine, and he had just finished adding up a page of arithmetic problems, and I saw one of his answers was nine plus eight equals fourteen. We all know it’s seventeen.