
“Speak Peace in a World of Conflict”

Nonviolent Communication Workshop with Marshall Rosenberg
Reflections and Critical Learning

Scott Schumacher



Sharon Gates-Hull as Julia Ward Howe - Northfield People for Peace and Goodwill

Photo by Scott Schumacher

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Close the School of the Americas Vigil and Funeral March - 2006

Photos by Scott Schumacher

Friday, April 27 and Sunday, April 29, 2007, I attended a workshop at St. Thomas University in St. Paul entitled “Speak Peace in a World of Conflict” - hosted by Marshall Rosenberg, author of the book, Nonviolent Communication. The workshop was a chance to both meet Marshall Rosenberg and to begin to practice the techniques of Nonviolent Communication outlined in his books. While in no particular order, the paragraphs on the following pages summarize some of the most insightful moments I experienced while attending.

Retributory Justice vs. Restorative Justice

“Our judicial system is one of retributory justice. It makes violence against other people deeply attractive and enjoyable. When someone is being punished, we feel as if they ‘deserve’ the treatment they receive, no matter how violent. This system is not restorative, by any means, and does not address our needs.”

I had never heard the term “retributory justice” before, but the idea was one that I was familiar. The notion of “if people break the law or do bad things, they DESERVE to be mistreated” is one that I believe is pervasive in our society.

Marshall spoke of the need for “Restorative Justice” instead. Restorative justice seeks to repair any harm done, by including all of the stake holders - from the individual committing a crime, to the victims and survivors, to family members and society at large. As he explained it, it is a system of transforming conflict and curing the conditions which give rise to violence. It is neither apology nor forgiveness, but a way to transform conflict into understanding, so that mutual needs are stated, understood, and fulfilled.

“Killing criminals or locking them up for life is an easy way to deal with our anger, so long as we are willing to pay for it. Justice is not restorative when it is steeped in revenge or the notion that we must make an individual feel sorry to our satisfaction for something that they have done. There is little that is more violent than forcing someone to feel sorry to our satisfaction. Children are taught at a very early age to ‘say they are sorry’ for their behavior, rather than understanding their own needs or the needs of others.”

“Do what is alive in you. The world needs people who have come alive.”

This statement struck me immediately! Throughout my graduate program I have been searching for key encompassing concepts that illustrate new ways for individuals and communities to live together. The sheer concise simplicity of this statement seemed to sing within me. Later in the workshop, I found Marshall’s new book, aptly titled, *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict*, which contained an entire chapter dedicated to this concept.

“We train our society within every level of education to become ‘obedient, guilt-ridden, shame-laden dead people.’”

This concept lead to Marshall describing an aspect of choice within everything we do. He asked the audience to call out things that they feel they “have to” do.

“Go to School.”

“Pay Taxes.”

“Work a job.”

“Obey the law.”

Within each concept he explored that they were actually choices, and that we choose to do them to meet specific needs. He was most challenged from the audience about paying taxes. In fact, Marshall disclosed to the audience that during the years of the Vietnam War, he consciously withheld paying his taxes to protest the amount that was paid to support war and militarism. I began the applause from the audience for this statement, followed by a hesitant, yet growing applause from the audience.

After fielding questions from audience members like “Did you use our roads when you weren’t paying taxes?” and “Did your kids go to public schools when you weren’t paying taxes?” , he explained how he in fact *did* keep his children home to home-school them, and that at the time he was lobbying for support in congress to pass a bill which allowed tax payers to ‘conscientiously object’ the percentage of their taxes that would be earmarked for military purposes. After this bill failed to garner adequate support, he then made it a point to give away as much of his earnings as possible, to live at an income low enough to legally not have to file to pay U.S. federal tax.

These were among his most controversial statements that audience members would continue to grapple with in their questions. Many in the audience were educators and parents looking for answers to their deepest concerns in interacting with children, and openly expressed their disdain for these kinds of choices.

“I’d be put in jail, or lose my home.”

“How am I protecting and providing for my children if I do that?”

“Shouldn’t we be putting even MORE tax money into public schools?”

Joyfully and most ironically, just as I had been learning about “unschooling”, Marshall spoke of the need for widespread educational transformation.

“Schools are some of the most undemocratic institutions we have. They can teach our children at an early age that it is more important to be obedient and to seek out approval than to find that which makes us come alive. If you like the world of school, you’ll certainly love the world of work. Schools trick our children at an early age to become obedient dead people.”

Throughout the weekend, many in the audience would struggle with ways to both combat the structures within our educational system and to live within it. Much of the practice time where parents would struggle with ways to interact with their children nonviolently seemed to also demonstrate to me, the strong hold of parenting expectations that are prevalent today. Though many of them genuinely tried to apply the methods of Nonviolent Communication at the microphone with Marshall, he would eventually need to step in to unravel the feelings, needs, and requests that they were wishing to express. Many of the role plays with parents were extremely emotional.

Learning to listen with Giraffe Ears

“The giraffe has the largest heart of any land animal. To listen with Giraffe Ears is to hear every statement as a gift, and to return these statements with empathy and validation.”

To illustrate Nonviolent Communication, Marshall would often use two puppets - on one hand a giraffe, and the other, a jackal. The jackal would embody all of the communication from a standpoint of pain, fear, shame, guilt, or violence. Everything the Jackal would hear, he would hear as a criticism and would react. The giraffe would hear every statement made to him as a gift, and would empathize in order to identify needs and requests.

“A giraffe can speak perfect Nonviolent Communication.”

Not only would Marshall use puppets, but at times he would place sets of “giraffe ears” and “jackal ears” on his head to demonstrate concepts. A father came up to the microphone to practice what he might say to his daughter, who had refused all of his attempts to communicate. To his confession of his own feelings and needs at the time of the conflict between him and his daughter, Marshall placed the giraffe ears upon his head and said the following:

“It’s good that I’m wearing my giraffe ears, because now I can really hear how frightening it is for you, Dad, to feel this disconnected from me. I can hear in your words a deep longing and regret for those things that were said in the past. It’s clear to me now that you were doing the best you could at that time, and I’m thankful to hear these words from you now. Would you like to hear my needs and feelings now, Dad?”

Through the use of the Jackal and Giraffe ears and puppets, Marshall would assist us in our practice of Nonviolent Communication - Expressing feelings, identifying needs, and making requests, all while listening and empathizing with the needs of those whom we are engaged.

My own practice with Marshall Rosenberg

Throughout the workshop, and in small groups, I spoke to many teachers about my ideas of “unschooling” and educational transformation. I would talk about the closing of The Village School of Northfield, and the efforts of Starwalkers, an intentional learning community born out of the teachings of The Village School. I received a lot of feedback in the form of enthusiasm from other interested educators.

Toward the end of the workshop, during the last session with the audience in front of Marshall Rosenberg, I set out to do my practice. For many reasons, I chose to speak in the voice of a child, to his father, of wishes to leave the public school system to begin an “unschooling” type of education.

Me: Marshall, I appreciate all you have said about education over the weekend, and the need to transform it. I admit, I have an alternate motive in the content I chose coming up here, and maybe this is as much an exercise for teachers and parents out in the audience as it is for me.

Me: “Dad, I feel very frightened and trapped by school, and am afraid for my own physical safety at times, as well as my future. What I really need is an education that allows me to follow my passions rather than just taking tests and not expressing myself. Dad, I’m wondering if you would be willing to work with me, at home, to continue my education here, and not in the public school.”

Marshall: (speaking to me frankly) “What do you think your father would say to you? What might his Jackal say?”

Me: “You have to go to school! How will you become a productive member of society if you don’t go to school. I’m a teacher! How would it look for me to have my son not go to school? You won’t get any kind of good job that makes any money if you don’t go to school.”

Marshall: (again speaking frankly) What would you say to your father, if you were wearing giraffe ears?

Me: “Dad, I can hear from your words that it frightens you to think that I might not be a successful adult if I don’t go to school, and that you genuinely care for my well being, and for that I thank you. I really do. But I have a need to feel free, and to not just serve a system that won’t help me to excel in my passions. I’m frightened even more when I think of the possibility of being just a ‘cog in the wheel’ of a system, and I’d really love to see what I’m capable of doing outside of this system. I’m different. I’m wondering if you would be willing to help me to succeed fully with the things I love, and to be a partner with me in my own education. Dad, could you say that back to me in your own words so that I know that I’ve explained it clearly?”

Marshall simply looked to the audience, and quietly gestured his hand to me in acknowledgment, then looked to me and said “thank you.” While I must admit, I had different motive with the content of my practice, I was glad to have had the chance to work directly with Marshall Rosenberg to do so.

My ongoing practice of Nonviolent Communication

While still, I am by no means an expert in “speaking giraffe” or in employing the aspects of Nonviolent Communication at all times, many of the skills I learned at this workshop have helped me in some moments of conflict. Whenever I feel anger to the point of rage, I imagine Marshall with his “giraffe hat” on, allowing him the time and space to think every bit of rage in that moment, yet not lashing out at the other person. I have found myself saying things like “Tell me what need of yours is not getting met.” or “I’d like to know how I can tell you these things in the future, so that you might hear them as a gift and not a criticism.” I’ll admit - it’s very difficult to continually speak “Giraffe” when everyone around you seems to speak fluent “Jackal.” It has helped, however, in some of my more long term and honest relationships with friends and loved ones, in the honest and empathetic expression of feelings and needs. Most often we can hurt the ones we love more easily with our words than any stranger we’ve met incidentally.

One of the greatest benefits of this workshop, to me, was not in the communication practice, but in my own practice of doing “that which is alive in me.” I find that it just as the communication practice feeds me, so does acknowledging what I am doing day by day that makes me feel alive. When I speak my truth I am alive. When I connect to my passions and those things which bring me the most joy, I am the most alive.

“The world needs more people who have come alive.”