A Book Review Of:

Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life
2nd Edition

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Nonviolent Communication
What’s it all about?

Violence, as most come to think of it, is an act of intent to do physical harm against another. In Dr. Marshall Rosenberg’s book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, violence is redefined as any use of force, whether it be physical, verbal or even nonverbal, that manipulates people to do things your way. When we try to coerce people into doing things we manipulate against their will, manipulation being one of the main forms of violence. This also includes any use of motivating others by fear of punishment and promise of a false reward, either through guilt, shame, duty or obligation.

Nonviolent communication also assumes that compassion is our basic human nature and contributing to the well-being of others is a basic human desire. We all share the same basic human needs. Feelings and emotions are signals that tell us, and others, that a particular need is not being met. Without these basic assumptions the tools provided in the book simply do not work.

All too often we mix up our basic needs with the strategies we’re using to meet those needs. And, we ask for what we’d like using demands, the threat of punishment, guilt or even the promise of false rewards. Most importantly, the book speaks of the four steps towards communicating nonviolently. With these four steps, we express honestly and receive empathically. The go as follow: 1.) Observation  2.) Feelings 3.) Needs 4.) Requests. These four steps aim to transform negative inner dialogs – “it isn’t my fault,” “why don’t people like me?” “Why am I so ugly?” – into an empowering dialogue that stimulates acceptance and self-growth.
Chapter 1: Giving from the Heart

In Chapter 1, *Giving from the Heart*, Dr. Rosenberg uses the term nonviolence as Gandhi used it—to refer to our natural state of compassion when violence has subsided from the heart. In practicing nonviolent communication, individuals build skills that enhance their ability to stay human, even under the most difficult of circumstances. The tools offered in the book help frame how we express ourselves and hear others. NVC communicators intend to express themselves with honesty and clarity, rather than the habitual caddy chatter that learned from social institutions. Communicators must retrain themselves to observe carefully and speak openly, rather than revert to old patterns of defensiveness or withdrawal.

While the practice of nonviolent communication is a process and does require the use of particular words and the exclusion of others, according to Dr. Rosenberg, nonviolently communicating goes even further. On a deeper level, it is an ongoing reminder to keep our attention focused on a place where we are more likely to get what we are seeking.¹ So whether it be used between partners in an intimate relationship, in a political arena, or simply among coworkers, nonviolent communicators practice this through whatever circumstances life offers them.

Dr. Rosenberg breaks down this process into a few simple steps:

1. The concrete actions we are observing that are affecting our well-being.
2. How we feel in relations to what we are observing.
3. The needs, values, desires, etc. that are creating our feelings.
4. The concrete actions we request in order to enrich our lives.

¹ Page 4
While it appears, at first, to be very structured and formulaic, Dr. Rosenberg reassures and stresses the point that, once familiar with the process, NVC is very malleable and can adapt to various situations and styles whether they be personal or cultural. So, the words we use to express this process doesn’t matter nearly as much as the intention held while communicating.

In Chapter 1, *Giving from the Heart*, Dr. Rosenberg introduced the reader to the basic components of nonviolent communication. He started by segmenting the process into two parts. He further elaborated on how to express yourself honestly and empathically through a four-step model. The first four components of nonviolent communication being: Observation, Expressing feelings, Expressing Needs, and Making a Clear Request.\(^2\) Observing before expressing your feelings is a vital component I desperately need to practice.

I recently had a dispute with my grandmother over a coffee table that was lent to me a few months back. She had requested for it back and I immediately spoke before thinking, reacting out of my initial objection to the idea. I said, “NO! That table is a vital part of the room. It’s the one thing that gives the space character!” She perceived this as a complete lack of respect, justifiably so. Later that evening, over our weekly family dinner she was still upset and hurt by my intonation and lack of respect. By Wednesday of the following week we sat down again to discuss what had happened. I arrived at her house, after having read the first chapter of this book, setting the intention to be quite and listen. That is just what I did. By being silent, she further disclosed to me other changes that

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\(^2\) Page 6 & 7
were happening in her life. By observing and listening empathically, I soon became clear over the situation and felt resolved. I learned though: Observing before expressing is really important!

**Chapter 2: Communication that Blocks Compassion**

In Chapter 2, *Communication that Blocks Compassion*, Dr. Marshall Rosenberg revisits the question, “Why do we behave violently?” He found that there are certain ways in which we communicate that alienate us from our natural state of compassion. By making value judgments, making comparisons, denying responsibility, and communicating we create communication blocks that inhibit mutual respect and dialog.

We are also violent through the use of moralistic judgments that place a wrongness or disharmony on people who follow different values than our own. This directs our thinking toward classifying, analyzing, and determining levels of “*wrongness rather than on what we and others need and are not giving.*”

According to Dr. Rosenberg, the perspective you choose and the absolute language you use are a tragic expression of our own values and needs. If they do act in line with our values, more often than not it’s done so to avoid “*our analysis of their wrongness.*” He further states that people will act not out of their desire to give from the heart, but out of fear, guilt or shame. Each time others associate our comments of, “they’re sloppy and disorganized, or she’s picky and compulsive,” the likelihood of their responding compassionately to our needs and values in the future decreases.

Violence, according to Dr. Rosenberg, is a kind of thinking that attributes the cause of conflict to the opposing parties’ wrongness, thus

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classifying and judging people promotes violence. While it may be our nature to enjoy giving and receiving compassionately, Dr. Rosenberg demonstrates in this chapter that over time we learn forms of life-alienating communication that lead us to injure others and ourselves.

Denial of emotional responsibility is yet another life-alienating commitment block, according to Dr. Rosenberg. The use of common expressions such as have to, as in “there are some things we just have to do, whether you like it or not.” This demonstrated how language can often be obscure and confusing. Yet another expression is makes one feel, as in “You make me feel guilty,” or “You make me so angry.” Both are examples of how language facilitates denial of personal responsibility for our own feelings and thoughts. Uncontrollable impulses, group pressure, a doctor’s diagnosis, all of these scenarios and others create a notion that our emotions are out of control. If we practice the tools of nonviolent communication, we can replace language that implies a lack of choice with language that acknowledges our free will.

While it may be our nature to enjoy giving and receiving compassionately, Dr. Rosenberg demonstrates in this chapter that, over time, we learn forms of life-alienating communication that lead us to injure others and ourselves. Nonviolent communication allows us to fare these situations with choice and consciousness.

In Chapter 2, Communication that Blocks Compassion, the chapter begins with a rather fundamental concept that can be summed by a quote at the start of the first page which states, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. For as you judge others, so you
will yourselves be judged.” Using this quote reminded me to incorporate God’s words into practice. Judgment, when used improperly, often comes from our first reaction or impression of people or certain situations. When we judge people it’s often before we take time to cleanly observe the person or place, without bias. Dr. Rosenberg believes the wrong use of judgment to be a form of alienating oneself, enabling you to separate yourself from another person and I completely agree.

By using statements like, “You’re lazy” or “You’re a freak,” we use absolute language that is unchanging and inflexible, permanently placing them in locked box. Yesterday, I caught myself saying, “You’re useless,” to my thirteen year old sister. At the time I was cleaning the house and had asked for her help to which her response was, “No, I’ve got homework.” Often, when she says she’s got homework she goes into her room, shuts the door and chats online. So, from a place of frustration and lack of patience I said aloud, “You’re useless.” I immediately realized that she, of course, isn’t useless. Instead, I would feel a lack of self-worth and uselessness if I didn’t contribute to the home by cleaning, even though I too had homework! What I really wanted to do was my homework! I took an internal, irrational thought and subjected it externally out onto my thirteen year old sister, hurting her feelings. Rather than externalizing it, it would have been better to take a moment and think about why the judgment was coming up for me. Progress, not perfection!

Chapter 3: Observing without Evaluating

In Chapter 3, Observing without Evaluating, Dr. Rosenberg introduces the reader to the first step towards practicing Non-Violent Communication through the act of

7 Page 15; Holy Bible, Mathew 7:1
observation. It involves a separation of observations from evaluation. Pretty simple, right? Well, no, not exactly. Dr. Rosenberg believes that when we combine observation with evaluation others are apt to hear criticism and resist what we are saying. He emphasizes that that nonviolent communication promotes development over ‘static generalizations.’ He defines Static Generalizations through examples, but they involve an action or event with a negative adjective or feeling in the form of absolute language. Observations, on the other hand, are to be made specific to time and context. Ultimately, we need to clearly observe what we are seeing and hearing that is affecting our sense of well-being, without mixing in any evaluation.

Nonviolent communication doesn’t demand us to remain completely objective, after all we are human. It merely asks us, as the reader and practitioner, to differentiate between the two. We create many problems for ourselves by using static language to express or capture a reality that is ever changing: “Our language is an imperfect instrument created by ancient and ignorant men. The mismatch or our ever-changing world and our relatively static language form become a part of our problems.”

It’s quite obvious that when we use negative labels such as “lazy” and “stupid,” they engender negative feelings and reactions in the other person that further distance you from your listener. Interestingly, Dr. Rosenberg mentions that even a positive or an apparently neutral label, such as “cook,” limits our perception of the totality of another persons being. When we label people by what they do rather than through expressions of who they are, we depict them as other than human. We depict them as a being that

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which is designed to serve us for some other reason than to connect on an interpersonal level, creating a form of violence.

There were also a few simple words mentioned that are often used as exaggerations, often provoking defensiveness. Words like, frequently, seldom and rarely can also contribute to confusing observations and evaluations. “You rarely are messy.” This uses absolute language while mixing in an exaggeration. The first words address the use of absolute language, “you are.” The statement also avoids and personal acknowledgement of the judgment being made.

As a means of breaking these habits Dr. Rosenberg demonstrated an exercise for readers to follow in which we identify the original communication component we’re looking for, an example of an observation with an evaluation and an observation separate from an evaluation.

In Chapter 3, Observing without Evaluating, Dr. Rosenberg offers a few practical examples of just how to do this. One particular practice was to differentiate a list of observations and evaluations, separating them into two different categories. To be perfectly honest, I didn’t do so well. I saw most of the evaluations as observations. In doing this exercise I realize that communication really does take practice. We can practice on paper, by reading and writing, and we can also practice by experience by intentionally thinking and speaking.

I re-read the chapter and learned that evaluations are often very tricky to discern from observations, that this is actually a common mistake among many practitioners of nonviolent communication. Evaluations are often very confusing and diluted, with little
to no specifics. Usually when we evaluate we are saying three things at once! Can you imagine? After practicing, and re-reading, I found myself still making evaluations throughout the day. I at least became observant of these and was able to watch myself do them. Now the next step is to not make them, think before I speak. What I also learned from this chapter was something that was actually not written by Dr. Rosenberg. If I don’t understand something clearly, go ahead and re-read the instructions or description. It’s worth the time!

Chapter 4: Identifying and Expressing Feelings

In Chapter 4, Identifying and Expressing Feelings, Dr. Rosenberg unveils the second component to nonviolent communication, expressing how we are feeling. This chapter investigates the ‘Heavy Cost of Unexpressed Feelings,’ ‘Feelings versus Non-Feelings,’ and ‘Building a Vocabulary for Non-Feelings.’ If you weren’t familiar with emotions before, then you certainly will be after reading this chapter.

Dr. Rosenberg acknowledges what I spoke of at the opening of my presentation, that on average we have more words for calling people names than we do emotions. He took it one step beyond when he attributed this to American Schools, of all things! “What was value was ‘the right way to think’—as defined by those who held positions of rank and authority. We are trained to be ‘other-directed’ rather than to be in contact with ourselves. We learn to be up in our head wondering, what is it that others think is right for me to say or do?” 12 Amazing insight, right?

Well, Dr. Rosenberg aids us in developing our self-awareness by first distinguishing between feelings and thoughts. Feelings are understood as our emotions,
whereas our thoughts are all too often confused with feelings and he urges us to identify these ‘non-feelings.’ “I feel that you should know better.” “I feel like my boss is so manipulative!” All of these are thoughts, not feelings! One way to differentiate the two is by discerning between what we feel and what we think we are, “I’m feeling irritated,” or simply, “I’m irritated.”

Yet another example in distinguishing between what we feel and how we think others react towards us are as follows, “I feel unimportant to my coworkers.” The word unimportant describes how I think others are evaluating me, rather than an actual feeling, which in this situation might be sadness or discouragement.

Another example being, “I feel ignored.” This is more interpretive of particular actions than a clear statement of when this occurred I felt this way because I interpreted as such. The statement, “I feel ignored,” can go one of two ways. Sometimes when we are ignored we feel relieved to be let alone, whereas at other times we feel hurt because we wanted to be involved.

Often we use words that express how we interpret others, rather than how we feel. By developing our vocabulary of feelings, we generate more authentic connections with others, reducing distance and work towards mutual resolution.

In Chapter 4, Identifying and Expressing Feelings, Dr. Rosenberg listed over fifty adjectives describing how we may feel when our needs are being met and our needs are not being met. This chapter couldn’t have come to me at a better time. I’m in the middle of creating a group presentation where we will be speaking on emotions. I took several of

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the adjectives from both lists and formatted them onto wallet sized pieces of paper in the hopes that my classmates will carry and use them throughout their day.

I have already used this vocabulary list at Safeway today! My cashier asked how I was doing and I looked first at the list (I think she thought I was looking at my grocery list) and responded with a feeling. When I asked her how she was doing, I showed her the card I had made, as a joke, but she actually asked to have it! We both got a kick out of it. I think that because I took the time to authentically express my feelings, it gave her the opportunity to do the same.

I also learned that I use a lot of non-feelings to describe how I am feeling. Dr. Rosenberg calls these false emotions. Whenever we describe our feelings through an experience or thought we are expressing a false feeling. If you think about it, the term I’m busy is not really an emotion. We could alternatively say, I’m feeling very rushed today. I’m busy can be interpreted in a number of different ways by the listener, such as, I’m too busy to talk with you, or I’ve got to go. It’s important to use adjectives that correctly describe our emotions.

**Chapter 5: Taking Responsibility of Our Feelings**

In Chapter 5, *Taking Responsibility for Our Feelings*, Dr. Rosenberg clearly identifies that what others do may be the stimulus of our feelings, but not the cause. Interesting right? Well, he further explains that there are four options for receiving negative messages: 1. Blame ourselves, 2. Blame others, 3. Sense our own feelings and needs, 4. Sense others’ feelings and needs. These four steps are relatively simple to
understand. Later in the chapter he speaks of emotional responsibility and the three stages associated with it.

The four options of receiving a negative message begin first by accepting the negative statement,\textsuperscript{15} at great cost to our own needs and wants. The second being when we blame others we engender feelings of anger and rage.\textsuperscript{16} Both of which are debilitative and don’t allow for growth and movement. Thirdly is our sense of our feelings and needs.\textsuperscript{17} We become conscious that our current feeling of hurt derives from a need for our efforts to be recognized. Finally, fourth option to receiving a negative message is to become aware of the other persons feelings and needs as they are currently expressed.

It’s useful to recognize a number of common speech patterns that tend to mask accountability for our own feelings. We do so through the use of impersonal pronouns such as it or that. “It really infuriates me when spelling mistakes land in our brochures.” “That bugs the heck out of me.” Through the expression, “I feel emotion because,” we displace the blame on something outside ourselves and instead use statements that mention only the actions of others. They often start with, “When you didn’t stand up for me,” the key here is to connect your feelings with your needs, “I feel…. Because I need…”

The course of developing emotional responsibility, as described later in the chapter by Dr. Rosenberg, can be divided into three sections. The first option being a form of “emotional slavery,” in which we believe ourselves responsible for the feelings of others. The second being that of the “obnoxious-stage,” in which we refuse to admit to caring what anyone else feels or needs. Thirdly, our “emotional liberation” occurs when

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we accept full responsibility for our own feelings but not the feelings of others, while being aware that we can never meet our own needs at the expense of others.

Whenever I hear a negative opinion over something I have done I immediately get defensive. In Chapter 5, *Taking Responsibility for our Feelings*, Dr. Rosenberg suggests another way for receiving negative messages, other than feeling defensive. He propositions four potential reactions that may occur when we receive a negative comment, either: we blame ourselves, blame others, sense our own feelings and needs, or sense other’s feelings and needs. I recently received what I perceived as a negative comment regarding my body weight from my grandmother. I immediately felt hurt and insecure after the comment. I have no recollection of thing about my grandmother’s own insecurities at the time the comment was made, instead I assessed how that comment made me feel.

This concept of assessing our own feelings and further assessing the feelings and needs of the speaker has never been formally introduced to me. It seems only natural that any negative comment directed at another would come from the projectors own insecurities, yet it never occurred to me not to personalize a comment that –on the outside- is directed at me. Nonviolent communication offers tools to respond in these circumstances by identifying the emotional process that takes place after the stimulus is introduced. I found this insight to extraordinarily helpful. Sometimes being shown direct examples –such as how to overcome anger directed toward you- is really helpful!
Chapter 6: Requesting that which would enrich life

In chapter 6, Requesting That Which Would Enrich Life, Dr. Rosenberg emphasizes the power behind the use of positive language. We use language when making requests. In addition to using positive language, we also want to word our requests in the form of “concrete actions that others can undertake and to avoid vague, abstract, or ambiguous phrasing.”

Making requests in clear, positive, concrete action language reveals what we really want. Therefore, the fourth component of nonviolent communication addresses the question of what we would like to do through the act of clear requests.

We need to be clear about the nature of the response we want, otherwise we may be initiating unproductive conversations that waste considerable amounts of time. Vague language contributes to internal confusion. The clearer we are about what we want, the more likely it is that we’ll get it. Dr. Rosenberg states, “It is my belief that, whenever we say something to another person, we are requesting something in return.”

A simple way to make sure the message we sent is the message that was received is to ask the listener to reflect it back. If the listener doesn’t want to verbally reflect what they heard back to you, than we may simply empathize with their frustration or anger.

Dr. Rosenberg also mentions that depression is the reward we get for being “good.” To him, this means that when we always do things for others and ignore our own needs, we repress our life-force, making it even harder to express ourselves in the future.

If we don’t clearly and directly communicate what we want from others, either

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intentionally or through simple lack of awareness, we contribute to feelings of frustration and depression.

We must also make sure that what we requested was not heard as a demand. To tell if it’s a demand or a request, observe what the speaker does if the request is not complied with. It’s a demand if the speaker feels defensive. It’s a request if the speaker, then show empathy toward the other person’s needs. Our objective is a relationship based on honesty and empathy. Hopefully this is true for everyone. ☺

In Chapter 6, Requesting that which would Enrich Life, Dr. Rosenberg introduces the process of communicating with the listener by asking for feedback and clarifying anything that may have been misunderstood. Furthermore, Dr. Rosenberg suggests that communicators make direct requests that allow the listener and the speaker to progress forward. He emphasized the importance of offering time for the listener to request clarity. Once the listener has reflected what was expressed, then the communicator makes a clear and forward request. This is a request, not to be confused with a demand.

I remember in my last intimate-relationship, I specifically requested him to “Clean up all the S@*t” he had left in my car he had left over the source of our road-trip. I had left it there for a few days in hopes that he would recognize it and clean it up, never saying anything with the hopes that actions speak louder than words. This was definitely not the case. Well, it didn’t take reading this chapter figure out the difference between a demand and a request. And the response I got from him after making the demand was one of defensiveness and disdain. No surprise there, I would have responded the same darn

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way. I wound up feeling like I was the one who was in the wrong and eventually apologized for my behavior. I was the one who needed to learn how to clean up my communication skills! Communication skills are more important than any action, because actions are a form of communication, but verbal nonviolent communication is often far more effective!

Chapter 7: Receiving Empathically

In Chapter 7, Receiving Empathically, Dr. Rosenberg applies the Four Components towards listening rather than self-expression. There are two components of nonviolent communication, expressing honestly and receiving empathically. He understands empathy to be emptying our mind and listening with our whole being. Sounds doable, right? Empathy occurs only when we have successfully shed all preconceived ideas and judgments about the other person. So, maybe not. Well, Dr. Rosenberg offers some helpful steps toward empathically receiving.

If we simply ask before offering advice or reassurance, we step towards empathically listening.21 We ask because it is often frustrating for someone needing empathy to have us assume that they want reassurance of “fix-it” advice. The key ingredient to empathy is presence, just listening.

We may also listen for feelings and needs. No matter what others say, we only hear what they are observing, feeling, needing and requesting.22 Dr. Rosenberg brings it back to those four simple components of clear communication. Listening to what people

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are needing, rather than what they are thinking we get out of our head and into the heart of the matter.

It is important to note that nonviolent communication doesn’t ask for an intellectual understanding of the opposing party, but instead to listen from a place of empathy. That is, when we are thinking about a person’s words and listening to how they connect to our theories, we are looking at people—not AT them! Interesting, right? This is very different then how we are told to listen in a classroom. For at least twelve years of every American’s life we are told to sit and speak when we feel we have something intelligent to say. How is intelligence defined? Is it defined by whatever topic we happen to be discussing in class at that moment? Even if a class member does speak up, rarely is it listened to or respected—for that matter—by other classmates. Nonviolent communication, when brought into the classroom, can be transformational!

After the individual has shared it is vital to verbally request for clarity at points where you think you might not have fully understood, as well as reflect back the entire message of what we heard. Reflection contributes to greater compassion and understanding. We know a speaker has received adequate empathy when we sense a release of tension or the flow of words comes to a halt.

Receiving empathically addresses the other side of communication, being able to listen and be present. In Chapter 7, Receiving Empathically, Dr. Rosenberg emphasizes the importance of how intellectual understanding can block empathy. By listening only to how the speaker connects to our own theories and values we limit our ability to connect with them on a basic human level, from person to person. This is counter to what I’ve
been taught for the past 19 years in school. In school, particularly science courses, we are taught only to speak when we know the answer and not to ask questions until we know specifically what it is that we are having trouble with, otherwise we are wasting the teacher/professors time. Understanding the concepts the teacher is expressing is vital to surviving in the class. This trains the ear to hear only in a particular way.

Non-violent communication asks us to step out of our head and into our human heart. This seemed contradictory to me because nonviolent communication appeared to have a very involved formatted way of speaking. Between false and true feelings, identifying needs that are and are not met, after which speaking about these needs in a structured and clear way, can make a huge difference in our communication patterns. Rather than reading a book and differentiating between the concepts that you and do not understand, nonviolent communication asks the communicator to read their emotions and needs. An internal sort of read, that follows with an external expression of those needs – met or unmet- in a structured way/ So rather than habitually going to a book and gleaning information from white pages, we’re asked to go to our hearts and interpret what’s going on from in a place that can’t be seen, only felt.

Chapter 8: The Power of Empathy

In Chapter 8, The Power of Empathy, Dr. Rosenberg proves through story, concepts, and scenarios how people can transcend the paralyzing effects of mental suffering when they have sufficient contact with someone who can hear them empathetically. The ability to offer empathy allows us to stay vulnerable, diffuse
potential violence, to hear no without feelings of rejection, and hear feelings and needs through silence. Empathy can be expressed both verbally and nonverbally.

Dr. Rosenberg notes that it is often easier to empathize with our peers and with those in less powerful positions, while we – as a people - often feel ourselves being defensive or apologetic, instead of empathetic, in the presence of those we identify as our superiors. He gave the example of communicating between faculty and students, mother and son, as well as an employee and boss.

Throughout these chapter reviews I have rarely touched on the example that Dr. Rosenberg mentions consistently within the book, and that is the power of empathically listening. Dr. Rosenberg had a female teenage client who hadn’t spoken aloud for weeks during their hour-long sessions, and in fact she hadn’t spoken for months to anyone. He described the process of being present with her, reading her signals, and speaking from a place of utter empathy. Eventually she unclenched her fist and exposed a piece of paper that read, “Please help me say what’s inside.” He goes on to say, “When I reflected back on what I had heard her saying, she appeared relieved and then continued, slowly and fearfully to talk.”

Self-expression, for some, is a difficult process because we have learned through various institutions and social dynamics to do as we are told. Dr. Rosenberg encourages the notion that self-expression becomes easier once we empathize with others because we will have touched their humanness and realized the common qualities we share. He gives a great example in which someone states, “I’m feeling hurt.” The evaluation of the scenario goes: “I could interpret them as taking advantage of my vulnerability (Option 2:

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Blame Others); or I could empathize with the feelings and needs behind their behavior.” (Option 4: Sense others feelings).²⁵ Ultimately, in this chapter Dr. Rosenberg drives the point home that in silence we say a lot by listening for other person’s feelings and needs.

In Chapter 8, The Power of Empathy, Dr. Rosenberg acknowledges that it’s harder to empathize with those who appear to possess more power, status and resources. I have deep-seeded financial insecurity that I can trace back to middle school when shopping was a favorite past-time, so this concept deeply resonated with me. I was well aware of those who were economically at a greater advantage than me. I grew to become very self-conscious of this, having been raised in a family of lower-middle class and surrounded by families in upper to high class. It was, and unfortunately still is, very difficult to empathize with people of more wealth than myself.

I turn quickly to judgment and resentment, like a flip of the switch, whenever I fear complaints regarding recent clothing purchases, money management, etc. Yet, Dr. Rosenberg states that by expressing ourselves and making ourselves vulnerable we increase our ability to be empathetic. In so doing, we connect on a closer level than ever before. As for applying that to myself, I feel very guarded and closed off when I’m around people of more wealth. Unfortunately, this tendency to be quiet and guarded has been with me for sometime. Practicing empathy would allow you to stretch beyond your economic class, your skin color, your day-to-day experiences, and hear the other person in a real and authentic way. It would allow us to really listen to the other person and hear

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what they are saying, not what they represent and whether it fits with what you ‘represent.’

**Chapter 9: Connecting Compassionately with Ourselves**

In Chapter 9, *Connecting Compassionately with Ourselves*, Dr. Rosenberg exposes one of the most important factors in non-violent communication, self-compassion. One of the most violent offenses committed is the internal negative self-talk we use against ourselves. If we aren’t compassionate to ourselves, how can we ever be compassionate to another? Since we want whatever we do to lead to the enrichment of life, it is critical to know how to evaluate events and conditions in ways that help us learn and make ongoing choices that serve us.\(^{26}\) By assessing our behaviors in terms of our own unmet needs we proactively move towards healthy forms of self-expression.

There is a particular word in the English language that Marshall Rosenberg absolutely despises and dedicated an entire page of this book to learning how to avoid. “It is so ingrained within our consciousness that most people would have a terrible trouble learning how to live without it, that word is “should.” When we communicate with ourselves on a regular basis through inner judgment, blame, and demand, it’s not surprising that our self-concept gives in to feeling more like a chair than a human. We are then challenged to evaluate ourselves moment by moment in a way that inspires change both (1) in the direction of where we would like to go, and (2) out of respect and compassion for ourselves, rather than our of self-hatred, guilt or shame.

As mentioned throughout this review and throughout the chapter, self-compassion is the first step towards connecting with others. So, in addition to mourning and self-
forgiveness, another aspect of self-compassion is the energy behind whatever action we take. He advises, “Don’t do anything that isn’t play!” When we are conscious of the life-giving motives behind an action we take, then even hard work has an element of play in it. He states that in connecting to this life-force, we deepen compassion for ourselves, to help us live our lives out of joyous play by staying grounded in clear awareness.

Dr. Rosenberg also identified in this chapter self-forgiveness as a key component to self-compassion. This involves connecting with the need we were trying to meet when we took the action that we now regret. With every choice you make, be conscious of what need it serves.

On the very last page of Chapter 9, Connecting Compassionately with Ourselves, Dr. Rosenberg states that the most dangerous of all behaviors may consist of doing things “because we’re supposed to.” Well, after going to school for over 19 years, being an older sibling to two sisters and a little brother, working since I was legally of age too, I feel like I’ve spent many ears operating on those terms and in those roles. However, what Dr. Rosenberg stresses is that we can be in those roles, operate in the world, without losing sight of our own values or “life-force,” as he likes to put it.

This concept was of course not foreign to me, but having it verbalized and on paper somehow brought clarity to the experience. He states, we cultivate self-compassion by consciously choosing in daily like to act only in service of our own needs and values. I believe and the reading seems to fall in line with his, that if we get our fundamental values they’re really quite simple. For me, being a person of faith, my relationships with

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people is equally important. The tools offered in nonviolent communication offer a close connection with people.

Sometimes I talk with people because I feel like I’m supposed to. For instance, during a weekly food addicts’ meeting that I attend there is a ten minute break in which we have the opportunity to use the restroom, talk with people, or simply sit and wait for the meeting to begin. I have a particularly difficult time just sitting and waiting for the meeting to start again because I feel like I’m supposed to get up and talk with other people. I feel as though those ten minutes are a mandatory social indoctrination period. This obviously is not true. We’re supposed to do what we want to do during that time!

Chapter 10: Expressing Anger

In Chapter 10, *Expressing Anger*, Dr. Rosenberg suggests that killing people is too superficial. This statement simply means that we are all superficial expressions of what is going on within us. Anger is not meant to be oppressed or purged, and the act of killing someone else only feeds the fire, what we are looking for is some form of expression that lies between. We do so, according to Dr. Rosenberg, by distinguishing between stimulus and cause.

The first step to fully expressing anger in non-violent communication is to separate the opposing party from ‘causing our anger.’ We are never angry for what others say or do.\(^{30}\) We can identify the other person as the stimulus, but it is vital that we make a clear separation between stimulus and cause.

Guilt is often a tactic of manipulation that confuses stimulus and cause. Dr. Rosenberg even goes so far as to say that the English language facilitates the use of guilt-

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inducing tactics. “You make me angry.” You hurt my feelings.” The first step in the process of fully expressing our anger is to realize that what other people do is never the cause of how we feel. The cause of our anger lies in our thinking—in thoughts of blame and judgment.31

Instead, we may use anger as a wake-up call that we have an unmet need. Where we judge others, we contribute to violence because we reflect that judgment upon ourselves. Dr. Rosenberg suggests that rather than saying, “I’m angry because they…” we say “I’m angry because I need . . .”32 When we become aware of our own needs, anger stands aside, giving way to our own feelings.

This chapter reiterates that violence comes from the belief that other people cause our pain and therefore deserve punishment. Sound similar to option number 2 of the four that were earlier described in the book? Rather than judging others and fueling our anger, Dr. Rosenberg suggests in this chapter four simple steps towards expressing our anger. Those four being to first stop and breathe; second, identify our judgmental thoughts; third, connect with our needs; and fourthly, express our feelings and unmet needs.33 He emphasizes that we need to take our time both in hearing and in applying the process of non-violent communication. These last four tools will help us do just that in the heat of the moment.

Wow! What a chapter! In Chapter 10, Expressing Anger Fully, Dr. Rosenberg opens with the statement, “Killing people is too superficial.” What? As I read further, he elaborated by saying that often actions made through anger don’t fully express the extent

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of the anger. Dr. Rosenberg connects the root of anger with a plethora of other emotions all jumbled together and unexamined. Sometimes drawing emotions from anger can be like pulling teeth. According to Dr. Rosenberg, violence comes from the belief that other people cause our pain and therefore deserve punishment.

He spoke mostly of our state prison system throughout this chapter. While I don’t have any direct experience with our state prison system, I know that I do approve the death penalty. I believe that some individuals are biologically hardwired to harm others. That neurologically, they are very ill. I have great compassion for these individuals. I believe that convicted felons need to be detained and separated from the community. The prison system is designed to do this. I don’t think it is the most effective system there is, but it is the system we have. It angers me that angry people have to be locked up with other angry people, because I don’t think that it engenders self-growth and development. I think it only fosters more anger and resentment.

Chapter 11: The Protective Use of Force

In Chapter 11, The Protective Use of Force, Dr. Rosenberg states that we must identify the difference between the protective versus the punitive use of force. The intention behind the protective use of force is to prevent injury or injustice, whereas the punitive use of force is to cause individuals to suffer for their perceived misdeeds.

Protective use of force is used when people behave in ways that are injurious to themselves and others due to some form of ignorance. Ignorance includes (1) a lack of awareness of the consequences of our actions, (2) an inability to see how our needs may be met without injury to others, (3) the belief that we have the right to punish or hurt
others because they deserve it, (4) delusional thinking that involves, for example, hearing a voice that instructs someone to kill.\textsuperscript{34}

Punitive action, however, practices the belief that people are truly evil and deserved to be punished. This falls under the mentality of “eye for an eye.” The correction is undertaken by making them (1) suffer enough to see the error of their ways, (2) repent, and (3) change.\textsuperscript{35} In practice, Dr. Rosenberg believes that this kind of action only engenders hostility and reinforces resistance.

Ultimately, when we fear punishment, we focus on consequences, not on our own values. Fear of punishment further diminishes self-esteem and goodwill. Nonviolent communication proposes two questions that would reveal the limitation of punishment. Those being: What do I want this person to do? What do I want this person’s reasons to be for doing it? Nonviolent communication fosters a level of moral development based on autonomy and interdependence, whereby we acknowledge responsibility for our own actions and are aware that our own well-being and that of others are one in the same!\textsuperscript{36}

So, in short, this chapter speaks of what to do in cases where there is no opportunity for communication, such as being in imminent danger, we use protective force. Protective force prevents injury or injustice, whereas the punitive use of force tends to generate hostility. Punishment damages goodwill and self-esteem, and shifts our attention from intrinsic value to external consequences. The protective action is one of correction not punishment, encouraging education rather than ignorance.
In Chapter 11, *The Protective Use of Force*, Dr. Rosenberg distinguishes between punitive and protective punishment. This of course brought up many memories of me childhood and associated forms of punishment. My father, being first generation Catholic-Italian, and my mother, having been born and raised in Marin, come from two very different cultural backgrounds and subsequently two very different forms of disciplinary backgrounds.

While at my father’s house I was often physically punished by my father, aunt, and grandmother. While my mother and grandmother on her side of the family, rarely if ever, used physical punishment on me. They instead punished me by grounding me, and requesting me to write letters of reflection and forgiveness. Now that I am a bit older, these dual forms of retribution are very interesting to look at culturally, while at the time it was all very difficult and challenging to process. This Chapter gave me the language and practical techniques to help identify and categorize my experiences and any future experiences.

**Chapter 12: Liberating Ourselves and Counseling Others**

In Chapter 12, *Liberating Ourselves and Counseling Others*, Dr. Rosenberg states that through the use of non-violent communication we can liberate ourselves from cultural conditioning. The ability to hear our own feelings and needs and empathize with them can free us from depression. This means that when we have a judgmental dialogue going on within, we become alienated from what we are needing and cannot then act to meet those needs.
Depression, according to Dr. Rosenberg, is indicative of a state of alienation from our own needs. These inner messages are infested with judgmental terms and phrases such as should and can’t. When we are entangled in critical, blaming, or angry thoughts, it’s difficult to establish a healthy internal environment for ourselves.\textsuperscript{37} By focusing on what we want to do, rather than what went wrong, we create a non-violent environment.

Dr. Rosenberg describes how professionals in psychotherapy can also use non-violent communication in addressing their patients. He describes in detail how to connect with clients on a human to human level, while still maintaining a level of professionalism. He states that the tools of nonviolent communication, mainly the four components first described in the book, engender a mutual and authentic relationship between psychotherapists and their clients.\textsuperscript{38} He goes on to state that, “[He] empathizes with clients instead of interpreting them; [He] revealed [himself] instead of diagnosing them.”\textsuperscript{39} This is an alternative way to approach psychotherapy, because while in school – for years- psychotherapists are taught to leave a professional distance between themselves and the client so as to objectively observe what happens. Dr. Rosenberg recommends doing so, but with empathy and compassion.

In Chapter 12, Liberating Ourselves and Counseling Others, Dr. Rosenberg quite simply states that we can liberate ourselves from cultural conditioning.\textsuperscript{40} Well, throughout my experience of living in Santa Cruz and attending UCSC I felt that I worked very hard at breaking many of my culturally conditioned habits.

\textsuperscript{37} Page 173  
\textsuperscript{38} Page 179  
\textsuperscript{39} Page 177  
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I lived in a thirteen-person commune in which we practiced meditation altogether for an hour in the morning and evening. We ate our meals communally on a nightly basis. Most of us were studying under the same department of History and Visual Culture. Various house members and guests would introduce to new topics they learned that day. At one point, we were introduced to the techniques of nonviolent communication and even, as a whole house, attended a weekend workshop held by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg. It was quite helpful in overcoming a few communication barriers that we were experiencing at the time. We found the techniques very useful, particularly because living with 13 other people in a three bedroom home created a lot of interactions with one another on a day-to-day basis. It challenged me, particularly, to hear my own feelings and needs regardless of where I am or what crows I happen to be surrounded in.

Chapter 13: Expressing Appreciation in Nonviolent Communication

Have you ever thought of a compliment as being violent? Well, in chapter 13, *Expressing Appreciation in Nonviolent Communication*, Dr. Rosenberg states that compliments are often judgments –however positive- of others. Even the statement, “It was kind of you to offer me a ride home last evening,” is considered a statement of appreciation in the form of life-alienating communication. Regardless of it’s positive or negative connotation, Dr. Rosenberg identifies any judgment statement as a life-alienating statement.

Dr. Rosenberg explores this concept in larger social dynamics such as in the workforce and in schools. It is often believed that complimenting a praising works as a tool of encouragement, to keep ‘doin’ the job. “Research shows that if a manager
compliments employees, they work harder. And the same goes for schools, if teachers praise students, they study harder.” Once they sense the manipulation, their productivity plummets! Therefore, nonviolent communication supports expressions of appreciation only if they come from a genuine place, not to manipulate.

In nonviolent communication there are three basic components of appreciation. The sequence goes as follows:

1. The actions that have contributed to our well being
2. The particular needs of ours that have been fulfilled
3. The pleasurable feelings engendered by the fulfillment of those needs

In nonviolent communication there is even a particular way of saying thank you, as thank you is believed not to be specific enough to whatever experience occurred. Instead, nonviolent communication supports “Thank you” by saying, “This is what you did; this is what I feel; this is the need of mine that was met.” In this way we incorporate all three elements into an eloquent form of appreciation that speaks directly to the experience.

When receiving a form of appreciation, it is important to receive it without feelings of superiority or false humility. Instead, we are encouraged to receive it with the same quality of empathy we express when listening to others, in that same genuine presence. We take into out hearts the joyous reality that we can each enhance the quality of others’ lives.42

41 Page 185
42 Straight from the words of Dr. Rosenberg on page 188!
This was arguably my most favorite chapter. Chapter 13, Expressing Appreciation in Nonviolent Communication, states that compliments are often judgments, of course with a positive intent, and can still yield violent interpretation. Even with the most earnest and sincere intent, a positive compliment may still be perceived as a negative judgment.

There are three components, according to Dr. Rosenberg, that allow us to compliment someone with minimal misinterpretation. “This is what you did; this is what I feel; this is the need of mine that was met.”

43 Man, Communication is Complicated!

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Conclusion:

Nonviolent Communication, otherwise referenced as NVC, is a method created by Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg and others in which individuals choose to communicate with from a space of compassion and with the intention for clarity. There are two main components involved with NVC. The first being honest self-expression, that is by revealing what truly matters to oneself in a way that encourages compassion in others, and empathy, listening with deep compassion. The most traditional method nonviolently communicate self-expression includes four elements: observations (not to be confused with interpretations & evaluations), feelings (emotions, separate from our thoughts), needs (deepest motives), and requests (clear, present, doable actions without any form of demands).

Those who regularly practice the tools of nonviolent communication (also called: “Compassionate Communication”), describe all actions as motivated by an attempt to meet human needs. The difficulty is trying to meet your own needs without coercive force or manipulation (engendering fear, guilt, shame, praise, blame, duty, punishment or even reward). The goal of Nonviolent Communication is mutualism, that is where both parties get their needs met. One of the most vital components to communicating nonviolently, according to Dr. Rosenberg, is the capacity to express oneself without the use of good/bad, right/wrong judgment, hence the emphasis on expressing feelings instead of judgments.

Dr. Marshall Rosenberg gave the following definition of nonviolent communication.
“Language, thoughts communication skills and means of influence that serve my desire to do three things:

* To liberate myself from cultural learning that is in conflict with how I want to live my life.
* To empower myself to connect with myself and others in a way that makes compassionate giving natural.
* To empower myself to create structures that support compassionate giving."

This definition concisely states the term of nonviolent communication. The book, however, is a manual that offers specific instruction on how to practice and incorporate nonviolent communication into your life.

Bibliography