Teaching Children Compassionately

How Students and Teachers Can Succeed With Mutual Understanding

A Nonviolent Communication™ presentation and workshop transcription by
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ISBN: 978-1-892005-11-3

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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