

# Musings of a Cyber-Bodhisattva

## *Communication Skills as Emergent Evolution*

by Dennis Rivers, M.A.

### Part 1



I want to tell you my story; not because I am such a special person, but because we live in such a special time, full of amazing possibilities. My life has been a string of fruitful calamities, and while I have learned a lot along the way, I can hardly take credit since I fought off each of the lessons for as long as I possibly could. Whatever I have come to understand about the spiritual life is much more the product of being overwhelmed, than a product of my own discipline or devotion. I would get stuck in one phase for a long time, then the pressure would build up, and suddenly I would learn something important and lurch forward to the next phase.

A winding path has led me to this present moment. I now manage a Web-based distribution of free communication skills training materials, available to audiences in over 100 countries. I remember in the early 1980s cranking out nonviolence training leaflets one at a time with the hot technology of that moment, an electric mimeograph machine. In the 1980s, I reached a few hundred people as a nonviolence trainer for the Abalone Alliance. In the 1990s I reached a few thousand people as a communication skills trainer and writer. In this decade, I have probably reached a half million people, and the circle keeps on widening. In the last few months I've been having global conversations. I marvel how a person can, with the click of a mouse, talk to friends and colleagues in Indonesia, Russia, and India all on a single morning. This was the stuff of dreams when I was growing up, and now it's here. In the immortal words of a 60's song, what a long, strange trip it's been.

#### FROM CONFRONTATION TO CONVERSATION

In the summer of 1978, hundreds of people in Santa Barbara mobilized against the building of the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant in the hills west of San Luis Obispo, about 90 upwind miles away. If Diablo ever melted, Santa Barbara would be radioactive toast. The fact that a nuclear power plant was being built directly on top of an active earthquake fault gave us nightmares straight out of Edvard Munch's painting, "The Scream". In the course of those 1979 antinuclear protests, I was arrested for the felonious planting of wildflower seeds on a nuclear reactor site: Burpee's California Wildflower Mix, to be exact. My little affinity group intended to demonstrate that the beautiful coastline of San Luis Obispo County should be preserved as a park, and not become a nuclear waste dump. As quixotic as these gestures may have seemed at the time, they did stir up enough debate about nuclear power for many sober people in the U.S. to reach the conclusion that nuclear power plants were giant, dangerous, money losers. And we stopped building them.

I led nonviolence trainings for antiwar and antinuclear groups all through the 1980s. Toward the end of that period, I began to see some weaknesses in the nonviolence training models I was using. Since our emotional responses to threat and conflict are shaped by a lifetime of experiences, it was not clear to me how you could rearrange those responses in an afternoon of supportive group exercises. I came to believe our demonstrations were nonviolent because people were encouraged to participate in supportive small groups; many of the people who showed up for nonviolence training were already deeply committed to it.

What seemed to be going on in trainings, as far as I could see, was less about "training" and much more about the renewal of deep commitments and values; that, and entering into a web of friendships that honored and shared those values. I also noticed that interest in nonviolent protest tended to be catalyzed by political or ecological calamity. The problem is, if we don't practice our peacemaking skills, we become hard-pressed to mobilize them when we really need them.

I began looking for models of nonviolent living. The communities that had the deepest commitment to peacemaking -- the Quakers, Buddhists, Franciscans and Mennonites -- had non-violence at the heart of their teachings. In other words, non-violent behavior was root and core—not just a fire extinguisher brought out to deal with emergencies. I began to understand the limits of what you can accomplish with the power of negation, of opposition. Now, don't get me wrong; I am against many things: war, rape, nuclear power, torture, strip mining... the list just goes on and on (and it seems like I can't get off, to paraphrase Cat Stevens). Out of an intense sense of being trapped in a world of overwhelming "no's," I began to study the issue of oppositional thinking and I gradually found a world of teachers and books that emphasized positive goals and positive language. Marshall Rosenberg taught me a lot about this in the 1980s, and in the 1990s I completed an M.A. in interpersonal communication, paying special attention to this issue.

In the course of completing my M.A., I encountered three contemporary movements in the world that are doing deeply creative work on the transition from negation to affirmation. One is called

*(continued on page 48)*

**Musings** (continued from page 5)

“positive deviance,” the second is “narrative therapy” and the third is “appreciative inquiry.” (not in any order of importance, they are all great) One of the most compelling examples of this approach is the work of Jerry and Monique Sternin in Vietnam on the issue of child malnutrition. Rather than playing the role of outside experts and trying to identify and correct the flaws in Vietnam’s food distribution system, the Sternins adopted a strategy of appreciative questions and deep listening. Was it possible, they asked, for a poor mother to have a health baby? When someone said yes, they would find the mother in question, and ask her to teach them about the way she fed her child. What came out were “positive deviant” practices, successful ways of growing, cooking and feeding food that diverged from the norm. Following the trail of this information, the Sternins developed a compendium of these already available improvements (such as growing small shrimp in the water of rice paddies). They took that information and used it to launch a mother-to-mother cooking school and mutual support movement that spread across South Asia, changing the nutritional status of millions of children.

In terms of lessons learned, deep listening and questions about positive possibilities have got to be at the top of the list. As one who participated in the Vietnam war, I was astounded to hear Robert McNamara, the principal architect of that war, confess late in his life that the reason the Vietnam war dragged on for so many years was partly because his team made no effort to understand the North Vietnamese, what they were thinking, how they were seeing their own situation. We assumed we knew everything we needed to know about them, and had no need to listen to them. As a result of this we were at a loss as to how to negotiate with the North Vietnamese in order to bring the war to close in a way that could even begin to satisfy both sides. Having classified them as evil, and ourselves as the noble opponents of evil, we had no reason to try to see the world through their eyes, even though that might have saved the lives of thousands of our own troops.

#### THE HYPERBOLIC ELBOW OF HUMAN TOOLMAKING

Over these past twenty years of writing, teaching and anti-nuclear campaigning, there is a theme to which I keep returning and it has to do with toolmak-

ing. This is an amazing time to be alive as a human being, because this is the first time in human evolution (so far as we know) that the power of tools has increased more than a million-fold in the lifetime of a single tool user. The computer that sits on my desk is a million times faster than the calculating machines that existed on the day I was born. The plutonium in a nuclear warhead is 3.5 million times more explosives than the waxy blocks of TNT plus ammonium nitrate that it replaces, a change that happened in the first four years of my life. The challenge, as I see it, is that we also need to become 3.5 million

*The challenge, as I see it, is that we also need to become 3.5 million times kinder and wiser, and we need to make that shift fairly soon.*

times kinder and wiser, and we need to make that shift happen fairly soon. I don’t know how the shift will happen, but it seems to me that this is the big challenge of being alive right now. This is what the universe is asking of us; this is the predicament that our own extremely successful toolmaking has created. It is not clear to me if we will be able to catch up with our runaway toolmaking, but it does seem infinitely worth trying.

There is a curve in mathematics called a hyperbola; it maps the equation  $X$  times  $Y$  equals one, and it has the shape of a half flexed human arm. The horizontal part of the curve slowly increases over a wide range of values, then it makes a sudden upward turn and takes off toward infinity. It appears that you and I are living in the hyperbolic elbow of human toolmaking. Can we steer human toolmaking toward life and away from death? That is the question on our galactic SAT test.

#### COMMUNICATION SKILLS AS EMERGENT EVOLUTION

My work on communication skills, which eventually produced *The Seven Challenges Workbook*, was my effort to take the underlying themes of nonviolence

training and translate them into a positive program for everyday living. Nonviolence gets a lot of its sense of moral seriousness by looking back at one or another horrific atrocities. But it is very difficult to move forward if you’re looking back. Being disgusted with violence and opposing violence are beautiful first steps on the path toward peace, but the path calls us onward, way onward. When I study the lives of Gandhi, King and Archbishop Romero, I see five virtues woven together into a beautiful braid: compassion, courage, honesty, creativity and a penetrating clarity of thought that allows a person to understand the fundamental interweaving of self with others. Gandhi challenged his followers to grapple with first principles such as “violent means cannot produce good ends; the means are the ends.” I like to think of communication skills as a kind of human fractal. A fractal is a pattern in nature that repeats again and again at larger or smaller scales: the way streams run together, and rivers run together, and blood vessels run together, and nerve fibers run together. It’s all the same pattern; one that nature uses again and again.

In a parallel way, the same processes of positive communication are to be found wherever you turn in human life. For example; listening more attentively, asking open-ended questions, expressing your needs more clearly, expressing appreciation more specifically, and so on, are the things you need to do in order to have a happy marriage, or raise a happy child. It’s what we need to do to have a successful team at work, to solve problems in our communities, or to help our world.

The same can be said for the five radiant virtues of my nonviolent heroes: compassion, courage, honesty, creativity and clarity of thought. I see these as the emergent virtues of our human life; what every human being strives for (whether they know it or not). This is ultimately what every family strives for, and each couple, and what every business is working toward. It’s what every nation and political party would be striving for as well, if they knew any better. Now, if you do a Google search on the words, “communication skills,” you will find *The Seven Challenges Workbook* at number six or seven out of 66 million pages that mention communication skills. People have asked me; “Why do you give this away?” Well, in this section I am going to describe the principles that I have tried to follow in sharing my work with the world. We never know all the causes that lead anything to happen, and our ideas about which factors were the

most important are mostly informed guesses. But, here are my reasons for doing this the way I do it; I hope it may inspire you to give your own gifts freely to the world:

1. In your area of concern and service, find people who are doing their best work and find a way to help and support them. As you lift up their excellence, you yourself will be lifted, and filled with new inspirations and understandings. This might include listing their websites on your website, or listing their articles on your articles page, or getting to know them personally and finding some more involved way of helping.

2. Give away as much as you possibly can. We all need to earn a living, but we also need a planet that we can live on, and a society we can live in. As you give away everything you possibly can, you're simply taking care of the wider ranges of the planet and society in which you yourself want to find fulfillment. Also; don't wait for someone to hire you.

Your deepest worth has nothing, I repeat, nothing, to do with what someone will pay you. Sing your songs today. Write your novel today, even if you are the only person who ever reads it. Write for God. Sing for the Milky Way. Only by giving yourself completely to the creative process that is calling to you will your talents unfold. Don't let the people with money hypnotize you into putting your creative development on hold.

3. Concentrate on excellence rather than originality. By way of analogy, you do not need to invent water, you simply need to bring water to the thirsty people with whatever container you can make. Most of what I have to say about communication skills has already been said by somebody else. I try to honor their contributions on every page. Yet, people write to me year after year telling me my *Seven Challenges Workbook* is the best introduction to communication skills they have ever found. I am thrilled to be part of a process that includes the work of so many great thinkers. Don't be afraid to copy the work of people you admire. As the extraordinary artist, Salvador Dalí once said: nobody every became anybody without imitating somebody.

4. Think of your talents as a garden rather than as a statue. If you imagine that your talents are a fixed inheritance, then you need to be perfect right away, and you

have hardly any incentive to practice or to learn from your mistakes. On the other hand, if you think of your talents as a garden, then every mistake you make is an opportunity for improvement, rather than a shattering of your self-image, and there is no shame in continuous learning. Quite to the contrary, continuous learning will be your path to success.

5. Believe in your dream and follow your inner sense of rightness. So many of the major inventions and artistic breakthroughs of the last centuries happened far from bureaucratic structures of authority in school, business or government. Think Apple creators, Steven Jobs and Steve Wozniak, building the Apple 1 in their garage. Or, Frank Herbert, whose *Dune* was turned down by over 20 publishers before it went on to becoming the best-selling science fiction novel in publishing history. Think of Van Gogh; living hand to mouth during his lifetime, whose paintings are now valued in the hundreds of millions. We now recognize him as one of the world's truly great, original artists.

The moral of these examples is that we cannot know in advance what effect our actions will have in the world. Our task is to make our offering, then let the tides of evolution sort out whatever is useful. Most of my examples involve a lot of practice. Van Gogh produced two thousand works of art in his brief career. Frank Herbert spent five years writing *Dune*. Wozniak and Jobs were deeply committed to their computer experiments. The lesson here is to prepare, practice, offer your best effort, again and again, and (to paraphrase Gandhi) leave the results to Mother Universe.

Let me close with a little parable about profusion processes in nature, like the spreading of pollen on the wind, inspired by Paul Hawken's book, *Blessed Unrest*.

*Once upon a time a child was lost in a forest. And the whole town went searching for her; all thousand residents. And they searched in a thousand different directions until one person found the lost child.*

We can't say on the basis of this story that since one person found a child, the next time a child is lost in the forest the village only needs to send out one person. All the people who searched in every which direction were part of the searching process. All of us, who offer our profuse efforts on behalf of the highest good of all, are all part of Life's great searching for a way forward. Without all these offerings, the way forward will not be found.

**Dennis Rivers** is a writer, part-time college teacher, communication skills trainer, and Web programmer. He holds a BS degree in business from UCLA, a BA in religious studies from UC Santa Barbara, and an MA interpersonal communication from the Vermont College Graduate Program. Dennis has written or edited five books, the most popular of which is *The Seven Challenges Workbook*, available at [www.newconversations.net](http://www.newconversations.net) as a free PDF in English, Spanish and Portuguese. Dennis reaches about ten thousand people a month with his communication-related training materials. Over the past ten years *The Seven Challenges Workbook* has been downloaded in whole or in part by half a million readers in more than 120 countries. Dennis is also an active writer, editor, web publisher and video streamer in several other areas, including liberation theology ([www.liberationtheology.org](http://www.liberationtheology.org)), human rights ([www.SupportGeneva-Conventions.info](http://www.SupportGeneva-Conventions.info)), ecology ([www.TurnTowardLife.TV](http://www.TurnTowardLife.TV)), and the evolution of prayer and meditation ([www.Prayer-Evolving.net](http://www.Prayer-Evolving.net)).



Dennis Rivers is the creator and/or editor of the following web sites:

[www.NewConversations.net](http://www.NewConversations.net)  
[www.ConversacionesNuevas.net](http://www.ConversacionesNuevas.net) (Spanish)  
[www.ComunicarMelhor.org](http://www.ComunicarMelhor.org) (Portuguese)  
[www.LiberationTheology.org](http://www.LiberationTheology.org)  
[www.Prayer-Evolving.net](http://www.Prayer-Evolving.net)  
[www.TurnedTowardLife.org](http://www.TurnedTowardLife.org)  
[www.EarthLight.org](http://www.EarthLight.org)  
[www.NoNukes.org](http://www.NoNukes.org)  
[www.SupportGenevaConventions.org](http://www.SupportGenevaConventions.org)  
[www.KarunaBooks.net](http://www.KarunaBooks.net)  
[www.HumanDevelopmentBooks.com](http://www.HumanDevelopmentBooks.com)  
[www.EarthHouseCenter.org](http://www.EarthHouseCenter.org)  
[www.BreakthroughCommunities.info](http://www.BreakthroughCommunities.info)

For a complete listing of Dennis Rivers' books and articles available free of charge in PDF format, please visit: [www.karunabooks.net/rivers/](http://www.karunabooks.net/rivers/)

For more information about positive deviance please visit: [www.fastcompany.com/magazine/41/sternin.html](http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/41/sternin.html)  
The Sternin's institute can be found at [www.positivedeviance.org/](http://www.positivedeviance.org/)