On the Front Line
Meet Marshall Rosenberg, quiet revolutionary
BY D. KILLIAN

Based on cover endorsements from John Gray and Jack Canfield (Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus and Chicken Soup for the Soul), Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion sounds like another New Age, self-help book. Yet like Noam Chomsky—who deconstructed language and then moved on to media and politics—is this easy way out. Making the self-help diva Jack Canfield is probably right: "the principles and techniques in this book can literally change the world."

For the last 35 years, Rosenberg has been on the front line teaching conflict resolution in hot spots around the world. though I was crazy. Obviously, we need to know whether what we eat is poison or not. We need to make need judgments continually in our lives—but keep those different from moralistic judgments. Every major religion has been saying this for centuries: judge not others. They're talking about moralistic judgments.

FT: Statistically, men are much more violent than women—are they just poor communicators?
MR: Men are more violent to other people. Women are more violent to themselves.

FT: Your method of conflict resolution is called "non-violent communication," but most people would consider language an alternative to violence, not a form of it.
MR: Well, I define violence in many different ways. There's institutional or systematic violence: the American judicial system is very violent—it discriminates on the basis of class and race. Then we can talk about physical violence, the one that most people think of—but not what I consider the most dangerous. And the physical is almost always based on the psychological, where you dehumanize the person with your language—implying some kind of badness, wrongness or inappropriateness. You define people with having the kind of badness as deserving to suffer. This is the most destructive concept ever invented by humanity: the concept of deserve.

FT: You talk about anger being a state of mind—a result of our thinking. But if you're not making a living wage or are being discriminated against for the color of your skin or the gender of the person you sleep with—injustice is not just in your head.
MR: It's not injustice. It's not meeting a need. If you judge it as an injustice, it's "wrong," then you're going to take action to get your need met. If you judge it as an injustice, it's "wrong," then you're going to take a violent action.

FT: U.S. foreign policy seems to be always punitive.
MR: Our leaders do not know the difference between the protective and the punitive. As we just saw, the right wing wanted to punish Clinton. They weren't trying a protective use of force—to protect the morals of the country. They weren't interested in that. They were interested in punishing...and punishment not only never works, it almost always creates enormous pain for whoever's using it.