



The Power of Empathy

Empathy That Heals

Carl Rogers described the impact of empathy on its recipients: “When . . . someone really hears you without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels damn good! . . . When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to re-perceive my world in a new way and to go on. It is astonishing how elements that seem insoluble become soluble when someone listens, how confusions that seem irremediable turn into relatively clear flowing streams when one is heard.”

Empathy allows us “to re-perceive [our] world in a new way and to go on.”

One of my favorite stories about empathy comes from the principal of an innovative school. She had returned after lunch one day to find Milly, an elementary school student, sitting dejectedly in her office waiting to see her. She sat down next to Milly, who began, “Mrs. Anderson, have you ever had a week when everything you did hurt somebody else, and you never intended to hurt anyone at all?”

“Yes,” the principal replied, “I think I understand,” whereupon Milly proceeded to describe her week. “By now,” the principal related, “I was quite late for a very important meeting—still had my coat on—and anxious not to keep a room full of people waiting, and so I asked, ‘Milly, what can I do for you?’ Milly reached over, took both my shoulders in her hands, looked me straight in the

“Don’t just do something. . . .”

eyes, and said very firmly, ‘Mrs. Anderson, I don’t want you to *do* anything; I just want you to listen.’

“This was one of the most significant moments of learning in my life—taught to me by a child—so I thought, ‘Never mind the roomful of adults waiting for me!’ Milly and I moved over to a bench that afforded us more privacy and sat, my arm around her shoulders, her head on my chest, and her arm around my waist, while she talked until she was done. And you know, it didn’t take that long.”

One of the most satisfying aspects of my work is to hear how individuals have used NVC to strengthen their ability to connect empathically with others. My friend Laurence, who lives in Switzerland, described how upset she felt when her six-year-old son had stormed away angrily while she was still talking to him. Isabelle, her ten-year-old daughter, who had accompanied her to a recent NVC workshop, remarked, “So you’re really angry, Mom. You’d like for him to talk when he’s angry and not run off.” Laurence marveled at how, upon hearing Isabelle’s words, she felt an immediate diminishing of tension, and was subsequently able to be more understanding with her son when he returned.

A college instructor described how relationships between students and faculty had been affected when several members of the faculty learned to listen empathically and to express themselves more vulnerably and honestly. “The students opened up more and more and told us about the various personal problems that were interfering with their studies. The more they talked about it, the more work they were able to complete. Even though this kind of listening took a lot of our time, we were glad to spend it in this way. Unfortunately, the dean got upset; he said we were not counselors and should spend more time teaching and less time talking with the students.”

When I asked how the faculty had dealt with this, the instructor replied, “We empathized with the dean’s concern. We heard that he felt worried and wanted to know that we weren’t getting involved in things we couldn’t handle. We also heard that he needed reassurance that the time spent on talking wasn’t cutting into our

teaching responsibilities. He seemed relieved by the way we listened to him. We continued to talk with the students because we could see that the more we listened to them, the better they did in their studies.”

When we work in a hierarchically structured institution, there is a tendency to hear commands and judgments from those higher up in the hierarchy. While we may easily empathize with our peers and with those in less powerful positions, we may find ourselves being defensive or apologetic, instead of empathic, in the presence of those we identify as our “superiors.” This is why I was particularly pleased that these faculty members had remembered to empathize with their dean as well as with their students.

It’s harder to empathize with those who appear to possess more power, status, or resources.

Empathy and the Ability to Be Vulnerable

Because we are called to reveal our deepest feelings and needs, we may sometimes find it challenging to express ourselves in NVC. Self-expression becomes easier, however, after we empathize with others, because we will then have touched their humanness and realized the common qualities we share. The more we connect with the feelings and needs behind their words, the less frightening it is to open up to other people. The situations where we are the most reluctant to express vulnerability are often those where we want to maintain a “tough image” for fear of losing authority or control.

The more we empathize with the other party, the safer we feel.

Once I showed my vulnerability to some members of a street gang in Cleveland by acknowledging the hurt I was feeling and my desire to be treated with more respect. “Oh, look,” one of them remarked, “he’s feeling hurt; isn’t that too bad!” at which point all his friends chimed in laughing. Here again, I could interpret them as taking advantage of my vulnerability (Option 2: Blame others), or I could empathize with the feelings and needs behind their behavior (Option 4: Sense others’ feelings and needs).

If, however, I have an image that I'm being humiliated and taken advantage of, I may feel too wounded, angry, or scared to be able to empathize. At such a moment, I would need to withdraw physically in order to offer myself some empathy or to request it from a reliable source. After discovering the needs that had been so powerfully triggered in me and receiving adequate empathy for them, I would then be ready to return and empathize with the other party. In situations of pain, I recommend first getting the empathy necessary to go beyond the thoughts occupying our heads and recognize our deeper needs.

As I listened closely to the gang member's remark, "Oh look, he's feeling hurt; isn't that too bad?" and the laughter that followed, I sensed that he and his friends were annoyed and not wanting to be subjected to guilt trips and manipulation. They may have been reacting to people in their pasts who used phrases like *that hurts me* to imply disapproval. Since I didn't verify it with them out loud, I have no way of knowing if my guess was in fact accurate. Just focusing my attention there, however, kept me from either taking it personally or getting angry. Instead of judging them for ridiculing me or treating me disrespectfully, I concentrated on hearing the pain and the needs behind such behavior.

"Hey," one of them burst out, "this is a bunch of crap you're offering us! Suppose there are members of another gang here and they have guns and you don't. And you say just stand there and *talk* to them? Crap!"

Then everybody was laughing again, and again I directed my attention to their feelings and needs: "So it sounds like you're really fed up with learning something that has no relevance in those situations?"

"Yeah, and if you lived in this neighborhood, you'd *know* this is a bunch of crap."

"So you need to trust that someone teaching you something has some knowledge of your neighborhood?"

"Damn right. Some of these dudes would blast you away before you got two words out of your mouth!"

“And you need to trust that someone trying to teach you something understands the dangers around here?” I continued to listen in this manner, sometimes verbalizing what I heard and sometimes not. This continued for forty-five minutes, and then I sensed a shift: they felt that I was truly understanding them. A counselor in the program noticed the shift, and asked them out loud, “What do you think of this man?” The gentleman who had been giving me the roughest time replied, “He’s the best speaker we’ve ever had.”

Astonished, the counselor turned to me and whispered, “But you haven’t said anything!” In fact, I had said a lot by demonstrating that there was nothing they could throw at me that couldn’t be translated into universal human feelings and needs.

We “say a lot” by listening for other people’s feelings and needs.

Using Empathy to Defuse Danger

The ability to offer empathy to people in stressful situations can defuse potential violence.

A teacher in the inner city of St. Louis related an incident where she had conscientiously stayed after school to help a student, even though teachers were warned, for their own safety, to leave the building after classes were dismissed. A stranger entered her classroom, where the following exchange took place:

Young man: Take off your clothes.

Teacher: *(noticing that the young man was shaking)* I’m sensing this is very scary for you.

Young man: Did you hear me? God damn it, take off your clothes!

Teacher: I’m sensing you’re really pissed off right now and you want me to do what you’re telling me.

Young man: You’re damned right, and you’re going to get hurt if you don’t.

Teacher: I’d like you to tell me if there’s some other way of meeting your needs that wouldn’t hurt me.

Young man: I said take them off.

Teacher: I can hear how much you want this. At the same time, I want you to know how scared and horrible I feel, and how grateful I'd be if you'd leave without hurting me.

Young man: Give me your purse.

The teacher handed the stranger her purse, relieved not to be raped. She later described how, each time she empathized with the young man, she could sense him becoming less adamant in his intention to follow through with the rape.

A metropolitan police officer attending a follow-up training in NVC once greeted me with this account:

I'm sure glad you had us practicing empathy with angry people that last time. Just a few days after our session, I went to arrest someone in a public housing project. When I brought him out, my car was surrounded by about sixty people screaming things at me like, 'Let him go! He didn't do anything! You police are a bunch of racist pigs!' Although I was skeptical that empathy would help, I didn't have many other options. So I reflected back the feelings that were coming at me; I said things like, 'So you don't trust my reasons for arresting this man? You think it has to do with race?' After several minutes of my continuing to reflect their feelings, the group became less hostile. In the end they opened a path so I could get to my car.

Finally, I'd like to illustrate how a young woman used empathy to bypass violence during her night shift at a drug detoxification center in Toronto. The young woman recounted this story during the second NVC workshop she attended. At eleven o'clock one night, a few weeks after her first NVC training, a man who'd obviously been taking drugs walked in off the street and demanded a room. The young woman started to explain to him

that all the rooms had been filled for the night. She was about to hand the man the address of another detox center when he hurled her to the ground. “The next thing I knew, he was sitting across my chest holding a knife to my throat and shouting, ‘You bitch, don’t lie to me! You do too have a room!’”

She then proceeded to apply her training by listening for his feelings and needs.

“You remembered to do that under those conditions?” I asked, impressed.

“What choice did I have? Desperation sometimes makes good communicators of us all! You know, Marshall,” she added, “that joke you told in the workshop really helped me. In fact, I think it saved my life.”

“What joke?”

“Remember when you said never to put your ‘but’ in the face of an angry person? I was all ready to start arguing with him; I was about to say, ‘*But* I don’t have a room!’ when I remembered your joke. It had really stayed with me because only the week before, I was arguing with my mother and she’d said to me, ‘I could kill you when you answer “but” to everything I say!’ Imagine, if my own mother was angry enough to kill me for using that word, what would this man have done? If I’d said, ‘*But* I don’t have a room!’ when he was screaming at me, I have no doubt he would have slit my throat.

Rather than put your “but” in the face of an angry person, empathize.

“So instead, I took a deep breath and said, ‘It sounds like you’re really angry and you want to be given a room.’ He yelled back, ‘I may be an addict, but by God, I deserve respect. I’m tired of nobody giving me respect. My parents don’t give me respect. I’m gonna get respect!’ I just focused on his feelings and needs and said, ‘Are you fed up, not getting the respect that you want?’”

“How long did this go on?” I asked.

“Oh, about another thirty-five minutes,” she replied.

“That must have been terrifying.”

“No, not after the first couple of interchanges, because then something else we’d learned here became apparent. When I concentrated on listening for his feelings and needs, I stopped

When we listen for feelings and needs, we no longer see people as monsters.

seeing him as a monster. I could see, just as you’d said, how people who seem like monsters are simply human beings whose language and behavior sometimes keep us from seeing their humanness. The more I was able to focus my attention on his feelings and needs, the more I saw him as a person full of despair whose needs weren’t being met. I became confident that if I held my attention there, I wouldn’t be hurt. After he’d received the empathy he needed, he got off me, put the knife away, and I helped him find a room at another center.”

Delighted that she’d learned to respond empathically in such an extreme situation, I asked curiously, “What are you doing back here? It sounds like you’ve mastered NVC and should be out teaching others what you’ve learned.”

“Now I need you to help me with a hard one,” she said.

“I’m almost afraid to ask. What could be harder than that?”

“Now I need you to help me with my mother. Despite all the insight I got into that ‘but’ phenomenon, you know what

It may be difficult to empathize with those who are closest to us.

happened? At supper the next evening when I told my mother what had happened, she said, ‘You’re going to cause your father and me to have a heart attack if you keep that job. You simply have to find different work!’ So guess what I said to her? ‘*But*, mother, it’s my life!’”

I couldn’t have asked for a more compelling example of how difficult it can be to respond empathically to one’s own family members!

Empathy in Hearing Someone’s “No!”

Because of our tendency to read rejection into someone else’s “no” and “I don’t want to . . . ,” these are important messages for

us to be able to empathize with. If we take them personally, we may feel hurt without understanding what's actually going on within the other person. When we shine the light of consciousness on the feelings and needs behind someone else's "no," however, we become cognizant of what they are wanting that prevents them from responding as we would like.

Empathizing with someone's "no" protects us from taking it personally.

One time I asked a woman during a workshop break to join me and other participants for some ice cream nearby. "No!" she replied brusquely. The tone of her voice led me to interpret her answer as a rejection, until I reminded myself to tune in to the feelings and needs she might be expressing through her "no." "I sense that you are angry," I said. "Is that so?"

"No," she replied, "it's just that I don't want to be corrected every time I open my mouth."

Now I sensed that she was fearful rather than angry. I checked this out by asking, "So you're feeling fearful and want to protect yourself from being in a situation where you might be judged for how you communicate?"

"Yes," she affirmed, "I can imagine sitting in the ice cream shop with you and having you notice everything I say."

I then discovered that the way I'd been providing feedback in the workshop had been frightening to her. My empathy for her message had taken the sting out of her "no" for me: I heard her desire to avoid receiving similar feedback in public. Assuring her that I wouldn't evaluate her communication in public, I then conferred with her on ways to give feedback that would leave her feeling safe. And yes, she joined the group for ice cream.

Empathy to Revive a Lifeless Conversation

We have all found ourselves in the midst of a lifeless conversation. Perhaps we're at a social event, hearing words without feeling any connection to the speaker. Or we're listening to someone my friend Kelly Bryson would call a "Babble-on-ian"—someone who

elicits in their listeners the fear of interminable conversation. Vitality drains out of conversations when we lose connection with the feelings and needs generating the speaker's words, and with the requests associated with those needs. This effect is common when people talk without consciousness of what they are feeling, needing, or requesting. Instead of being engaged in an exchange of life energy with other human beings, we see ourselves becoming wastebaskets for their words.

How and when do we interrupt a dead conversation to bring it back to life? I'd suggest the best time to interrupt is when we've heard one word more than we want to hear. The longer we wait, the harder it is to be civil when we do step in. Our intention in interrupting is not to claim the floor for ourselves, but to help the speaker connect to the life energy behind the words being spoken.

We do this by tuning in to possible feelings and needs. Thus, if an aunt is repeating the story about how twenty years ago her husband deserted her and her two small children, we might interrupt by saying, "So, Auntie, it sounds like you are still feeling hurt, wishing you'd been treated more fairly." People are not aware that empathy is often what they are needing. Neither do they realize that they are more likely to receive that empathy by expressing the feelings and needs that are alive in them than by recounting tales of past injustice and hardship.

To bring a conversation back to life: interrupt with empathy.

Another way to bring a conversation to life is to openly express our desire to be more connected, and to request information that would help us establish that connection. Once, at a cocktail party, I was in the midst of an abundant flow of words that to me seemed lifeless. "Excuse me," I broke in, addressing the group of nine other people I'd found myself with, "I'm feeling impatient because I'd like to be more connected with you, but our conversation isn't creating the kind of connection I'm wanting. I'd like to know if the conversation we've been having is meeting your needs, and if so, what needs of yours are being met through it."

All nine people stared at me as if I had thrown a rat in the punch bowl. Fortunately, I remembered to tune in to the feelings and needs being expressed through their silence. “Are you annoyed with my interrupting because you would have liked to continue the conversation?” I asked.

After another silence, one of the men replied, “No, I’m not annoyed. I was thinking about what you were asking. And no, I wasn’t enjoying the conversation; in fact, I was totally bored with it.”

What bores the listener bores the speaker too.

At the time, I was surprised to hear his response because he had been the one doing most of the talking! Now I am no longer surprised: I have since discovered that conversations that are lifeless for the listener are equally so for the speaker.

You may wonder how we can muster the courage to flatly interrupt someone in the middle of a sentence. I once conducted an informal survey, posing the following question: “If you are using more words than somebody wants to hear, do you want that person to pretend to listen or to stop you?” Of the scores of people I approached, all but one expressed a preference to be stopped. Their answers gave me courage by convincing me that it is more considerate to interrupt people than to pretend to listen. All of us want our words to enrich others, not to burden them.

Speakers prefer that listeners interrupt rather than pretend to listen.

Empathy for Silence

One of the hardest messages for many of us to empathize with is silence. This is especially true when we’ve expressed ourselves vulnerably and need to know how others are reacting to our words. At such times, it’s easy to project our worst fears onto the lack of response and forget to connect with the feelings and needs being expressed through the silence.

Empathize with silence by listening for the feelings and needs behind it.

One time when I was working with the staff of a business organization, I was talking about something deeply emotional and began to cry. When I looked up, I received a response from the organization's director that was not easy for me to receive: silence. He turned his face from me with what I interpreted to be an expression of disgust. Fortunately, I remembered to put my attention on what might be going on within him, and said, "I'm sensing from your response to my crying that you're feeling disgusted, and you'd prefer to have someone more in control of his feelings consulting with your staff."

If he had answered yes, I would have been able to accept that we had different values around expressing emotions, without somehow thinking that I was wrong for having expressed my emotions as I did. But instead of "yes," the director replied, "No, not at all. I was just thinking of how my wife wishes I could cry." He went on to reveal that his wife, who was divorcing him, had been complaining that living with him was like living with a rock.

During my practice as a psychotherapist, I was contacted by the parents of a twenty-year-old woman under psychiatric care. She had been undergoing medication, hospitalization, and shock treatments for several months, and had become mute three months before her parents contacted me. When they brought her to my office, she had to be assisted because, left to herself, she didn't move.

In my office, she crouched in her chair, shaking, her eyes on the floor. Trying to connect empathically with the feelings and needs being expressed through her nonverbal message, I said, "I'm sensing that you are frightened and would like to be sure that it's safe to talk. Is that accurate?"

She showed no reaction, so I expressed my own feeling by saying, "I'm very concerned about you, and I'd like you to tell me if there's something I could say or do to make you feel safer." Still no response. For the next forty minutes, I continued to either

reflect her feelings and needs or express my own. There was no visible response, nor even the slightest recognition that I was trying to communicate with her. Finally I expressed that I was tired, and that I wanted her to return the following day.

The next few days were like the first. I continued focusing my attention on her feelings and needs, sometimes verbally reflecting what I understood and sometimes doing so silently. From time to time I would express what was going on in myself. She sat shaking in her chair, saying nothing.

On the fourth day, when she still didn't respond, I reached over and held her hand. Not knowing whether my words were communicating my concern, I hoped the physical contact might do so more effectively. At first contact, her muscles tensed and she shrank further back into her chair. I was about to release her hand when I sensed a slight yielding, so I kept my hold; after a few moments I noticed a progressive relaxation on her part. I held her hand for several minutes while I talked to her as I had the first few days. Still she said nothing.

When she arrived the next day, she appeared even more tense than before, but there was one difference: she extended a clenched fist toward me while turning her face away from me. I was at first confused by the gesture, but then sensed she had something in her hand she wanted me to have. Taking her fist in my hand, I pried open her fingers. In her palm was a crumpled note with the following message: "Please help me say what's inside."

I was elated to receive this sign of her desire to communicate. After another hour of encouragement, she finally expressed a first sentence, slowly and fearfully. When I reflected back what I had heard her saying, she appeared relieved and then continued, slowly and fearfully, to talk. A year later, she sent me a copy of the following entries from her journal:

I came out of the hospital, away from shock treatments and strong medicine. That was about April. The three months before that are completely

blank in my mind, as well as the three and a half years before April.

They say that, after getting out of the hospital, I went through a time at home of not eating, not talking, and wanting to stay in bed all the time. Then I was referred to Dr. Rosenberg for counseling. I don't remember much of those next two or three months other than being in Dr. Rosenberg's office and talking with him.

I'd begun 'waking up' since that first session with him. I'd begun sharing with him things that bothered me—things that I would never have dreamed of telling anyone about. And I remember how much that meant to me. It was so hard to talk. But Dr. Rosenberg cared about me and showed it, and I wanted to talk with him. I was always glad afterwards that I had let something out. I remember counting the days, even the hours, until my next appointment with him.

I've also learned that facing reality is not all bad. I am realizing more and more of the things that I need to stand up to, things that I need to get out and do on my own.

This is scary. And it's very hard. And it's so discouraging that when I am trying really a lot, I can still fail so terribly. But the good part of reality is that I've been seeing that it includes wonderful things, too.

I've learned in the past year about how wonderful it can be to share myself with other people. I think it was mostly just one part that I learned, about the thrill of my talking to other people and having them actually listen—even really understand at times.

I continue to be amazed by the healing power of empathy. Time and again I have witnessed people transcend the paralyzing effects of psychological pain when they have sufficient contact with

someone who can hear them empathically. As listeners, we don't need insights into psychological dynamics or training in psychotherapy. What is essential is our ability to be present to what's really going on within—to the unique feelings and needs a person is experiencing in that very moment.

Empathy lies in our ability to be present.

Summary

Our ability to offer empathy can allow us to stay vulnerable, defuse potential violence, hear the word *no* without taking it as a rejection, revive a lifeless conversation, and even hear the feelings and needs expressed through silence. Time and again, people transcend the paralyzing effects of psychological pain when they have sufficient contact with someone who can hear them empathically.