

## Some Thoughts on Empathy

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The 13th century poet—Rumi—writes:  
Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
there is a field. I'll meet you there.  
When the soul lies down in that grass,  
the world is too full to talk about.  
Ideas, language, even the phrase “each other” doesn't make any sense.

What brings us here today? What is *your* story, *your* background? Why do we care knowing about *each other*? When Marika asked me to participate in this conference, the topic of empathy seemed most appropriate, since it involves so much of how I teach and what my work is about. Empathy is difficult to define. The ancient Greek word *empathia* means ‘physical affection, passion, partiality’ and was adapted to create the German word *Einfühlung*, a ‘feeling into’. The Random House Dictionary defines empathy as “the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another”.

We've all heard the phrase: Put yourself in someone else's shoes, but exactly *how* do we do that? The typical response to observing or listening to someone else's hardship is to reply, “I understand what you're going through.”... “I've been there.”... “It will be alright.” These are well intentioned comments, but can seem dismissive and uncaring.

How is it possible to understand what an Other's experience is— if you've never experienced it?

We may know the term *schadenfreude*, or the taking of pleasure in another person's misfortune. For example, seeing someone trip on the sidewalk, and then, being grateful that it wasn't you who experienced the embarrassment. We've probably known someone who became sick in public; or we've seen or experienced a child having a tantrum; or we've observed an inappropriate giggle; or an outburst of hostility at the wrong time; and on and on.

If we understand anything about human nature, we know that when these very real, very human occurrences happen to someone else, we are thankful that it didn't happen to us.

What happens when we come face to face with someone from another culture? How do those of us who are privileged relate to someone from another country, a different race, with different values, a different language and religion?

Our natural reaction may be to isolate ourselves— to protect ourselves, our tribe, what is familiar and valued. Is it possible to have empathy for someone different than us? Is there a connective bridge? What are our options?

I've come to know empathy through a study of apathy, anhedonia (the inability to experience pleasure), boredom and depression. The Random House Dictionary defines apathy as "the absence or suppression of passion, emotion or excitement; a lack of interest in or concern for things which others find moving or exciting; freedom from emotion of any kind."

True apathy is an illness. Soldiers returning from war often suffer from an inability to experience the world, due to exposure to trauma.

Let's assume that we are not suffering from the illness, but, rather, we choose apathy vs. empathy. What drives this choice?

Empathy is **not just one emotion**. It is the experience of a complex of variable emotions. We must be fully informed by the range of possible feelings— disappointment, resentment, sorrow, anger, rage, fear, etc.

A case study as an example: A middle aged couple decide that it would be more cost effective, and better for their elderly mother to live with them, rather than place her in an assisted living facility, where she would need 24-hour care. The wife, agrees to have her mother-in-law join the family. However, the mother-in-law is a dominant personality, narcissistic we might say. She speaks only about herself, has been a dominant matriarch in the family for years, and grates on the daughter-in-law's nerves. People who hear of this family's agreed upon arrangement express awe of the elderly mother-in-law: "Bless her heart!" "That's amazing!" "Good for her!" and "We should all be so lucky!" Meanwhile, the daughter-in-law feels annoyance and frustration at the intrusiveness of the situation. The elderly parent thrives. Not succumbing to her age, the mother-in-law seems to take strength in her new home.

The daughter-in-law, is a college educated woman, and knows the situation is temporary. "You should be glad that you are creating a wonderful right-of-passage for your mother-in-law," says one friend. "You are doing a wonderful thing for her," says another. "Your mother-in-law is adorable!" says yet another friend.

"...If she's so adorable, you can have her!" the daughter-in-law thinks to herself. Is the daughter-in-law to blame in this situation?

Is empathy possible? Can a 60-year-old woman feel empathic toward a 102-year-old matriarch? I would say yes... precisely by an acceptance and tolerance of a range of difficult and challenging feelings will she access an empathic concern toward a woman whose life is now in her hands and part of her home.

The woman will need brutal honesty, authenticity and a tolerance of resent-

ment, frustration and annoyance that is caused by the intrusiveness of her current living situation. She will feel anger, possibly rage, helplessness and perhaps, hopelessness. If she accepts these feelings, admits that she is having them, takes responsibility for them and tolerates the working through process, she may yet experience a connective bridge to compassion and sympathy toward someone whose shoes she could never possibly know.

To do this takes a great deal of effort and is *not* comfortable or pleasant. It is a decision that is made to do very difficult work.

Apathy, on the other hand is also a choice. Apathy is an affectless state of uncaring. When we are apathetic we absolve ourselves of all commitment and responsibility for our actions— or inactions.

We must seek to find empathy. By doing this difficult work, we may come to understand an Other, someone who is different. Can we find a connective bridge? A bridge that encourages vulnerability, fosters understanding and collectively accepts difference as part of a living human experience?

Another case example: A young man told me a story of how driving in the streets of a large city, he came across a disoriented homeless man picking up his things that had fallen all across the street. He sees a young woman on a bicycle, stop, park her bike and help the man collect his belongings. Another man, walking on the sidewalk, sees the woman helping the homeless man and stops to lend a shoulder and help walk the man to the curb and onto the sidewalk. Meanwhile, the young man telling me his story, sat behind the steering wheel of his car, aware that he gave up an opportunity to become visible. He chose to stay invisible. Later, he expressed guilt for not having done more.

The choices we make each day are meaningful and leave a lasting impression.

Casting judgement... turning away opportunities to make a connection... these choices challenge us each day. Where do we look for guidance?

**Empathy is not easy.** To be empathic is a learned skill. Many difficult and challenging feelings must be endured and tolerated, and spoken about. We must learn **how** to talk to one another. The realization that *you have the power* to be hurtful and injurious to an Other, but *you choose not to*... The awareness of the power to destroy an Other, *but you choose* to bridge a connection, *to master your destructive impulses* and work to understand that Other... that is empathy, and at the core of what it means to be human, not just animal.

Helene Cixous and Catherine Clemente (authors and activists) wrote this meaningful quote that inspired my Tea towel project: “Somewhere every culture has

an imaginary zone for what it excludes and it is that zone that we must try to remember today.” I would add... not just to remember, but to celebrate! The tea towels involved in my project are evidence of lives who have been challenged by the very feelings I’ve mentioned. These are caregivers from all parts of the world—various states in the US, Canada, Scotland, Latvia, Mexico, Argentina, Tanzania, Iceland, New Zealand and others.

As a metaphor, the old, used, invisible tea towel reminds me of those whom they served and the care givers that provided the service, unremarkably... quietly... without fanfare... or the clamour for media attention.

These cloths hide nothing. They are not formed by the polished, packaged media messages. They are raw, unpolished, threads that lay bare the many long, hard years of service. Their vulnerability disarms mainstream media messages—they set up another dialogue.

I collect them as a living metaphor that informs my work as a teacher, artist and designer.

I love the way they smell. Some are cotton, some linen, some with woven fibers, some with printed designs. I love the touch and feel of the fibers, the materiality, the hand of each cloth. They are not mainstream sexy. These cloths represent care givers from many cultures, many parts of the world, different ethnicity, religions, genders, young and old, yet they share a similar story— a collective story. These stories are woven into the threadbare, worn, torn edges, the ruptures, tears and stains.

I realize that this is not common. It is not what the media would have us celebrate. They would have us believe that young and new is good, old is bad. Bigger is better and less *is* less.

These cloths are those that are relegated to the back of a drawer— to be used when REAL work needs to be done: wiping up spills on the floor, cleaning up messes. If you’ve ever noticed the difference between a new tea towel vs. an older one, you recognize the significance.

*What can we learn* from these? Can they inform us of a connective bridge?

We are missing this balance in our culture, particularly at this time. Media messages promoting consumption of the new, and destruction and casting off of the old... are broken!

We must begin a new dialogue, a *collective* conversation.

We must learn how to speak with each other. Do we really know who ‘each other’ is? Can we find the *Other* in ourselves?