



*Begin the practice of empathy*

## **Empathy**

### **Opening**

Empathy seems to be in short supply these days. How often do you feel unheard? How about when you are facing a challenge and no one around you seems to care? As the pace of life has picked up, since the time that most people became glued to their phones, one might argue that displays of empathy went on an endangered species list.

But when the reverse holds true, and someone asks you genuinely how you are, take a second and really get in touch with how that makes you feel. It is a human need to feel connected, to feel heard, to appreciate the extension of compassion. The old expression “Sorrow shared is half the sorrow; Joy shared is double the joy” is not only true but makes one reflect on how few are the times in our busy lives that we actually share our joys and sorrows. As a larger fraction of people live alone, the empathy they receive from others may become less and less. And this makes our overall society less connected, less empathetic, less caring.

But your Leadership Presence is innately empathetic, deeply caring, inherently compassionate. And when one meets a person who exhibits interest and empathy, ask yourself how you feel. As Maya Angelou, President Obama’s Poet Laureate said, “People don’t remember what you said to them, what they will remember is how you made them

feel.” Empathy is about feelings, and a leader in touch with their essence shows the people around them that they feel for them. They feel shared joy in the joys, and they feel the challenges as well. Not taking on the person’s pain, not becoming immobilized by it, but at a human level understanding what their family member, friend, colleague, neighbor or complete stranger is going through. The sharing person has made them-self vulnerable through the actual sharing, and this is rewarded by an empathetic connection from the listener. And in that reward of empathy, there may be a glimmer of hope for a path out of the challenge zone. But without the empathy, no such pathway will be illuminated or perceived.

### **The Problem—What’s Missing?**

As we go about our daily lives, we tend to ‘See the Other’ in the people we cross paths with. We focus on our minute differences, rather than take a step back and appreciate the vastness of our commonality as humans. So if we see someone experiencing difficulties, we don’t reach out to connect or empathize, we go inward as a form of self-protection. This fosters over time an increasing self-reliance in all or many of us, and we may then keep riding this downward spiral to a point where we are incapable of feeling empathy for anyone, even those who are close to us.

But, as with so many things in life, if we take a step back, we can realize that we are all standing on the shoulders of many people. Parents, teachers, neighbours, mentors, co-workers and others have all propped us up along the way. These folks have shown us empathy and support when we needed it the most. These supporters were not identical to us, but saw beyond that to our humanity and the common values we share so that they could help us on our path. As George Washington Carver so eloquently stated “How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life, you will have been all of these.”



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When my family lived in New Orleans, we came across folks who were living life on the margins. A fellow knocked on our door one Saturday night and asked if he could cut the grass out front for some cash. The Summer heat had come early, he had a child with asthma and his power had been cut off, so he couldn’t run his air conditioner to give the young person some relief. His neighbor allowed him to run an extension cord from his apartment to his air conditioner, but at an exorbitant daily rate. Hence, the need to make some cash from lawn cutting. But as the weeks went by, he was floated advance money for future grass cutting, just to cool his apartment on those sweltering days. And then he stopped coming, perhaps embarrassed to ask for more money for future work. When we were packing up to move back home, a couple of tradesmen were working on a neighbouring home, and I asked them if they knew my grass cutter. They immediately said yes, right down to the detail of his child with asthma. And when I uncharitably suggested the gentleman owed me some grass cutting, one of the tradesmen gently said...”Sometimes a brother just needs a hand...” And in that one phrase, I quickly learned a valuable lesson in empathy.

### **Credibility Story/Success Story**

The human experience, on an individual and collective level, is resoundingly characterized by displays of empathy. When President Obama poignantly sang Amazing Grace at the end of a funeral service for the preacher who fell during a mass shooting in a church in Charleston, South Carolina, we all felt his empathy for the bereaved family and his church congregation. When Haiti experienced a series of natural disasters, we saw the mobilization of a large number of aid initiatives to try to bring the island nation back to its feet. When Fort McMurray saw devastating wildfires rip through the community, we saw an outpouring of empathy and support across the breadth of Canada. We are hard-wired to be empathetic, naturally inclined to help others in need, but the stresses of everyday life have blunted these inherent tendencies so that their display may not be shown on a day-to-day, minute-by-minute basis, but more when the chips are down and catastrophe brings out the best in our hearts.

## Clear Statement of Solution

To show empathy to others, we may be well served to invoke the Golden Rule. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' is a succinct reminder to show empathy to others if you would appreciate empathy being shown to you. Another valuable truism is 'stand in their shoes', suggesting that we disassociate from our own story or perspective and really attempt to plug into another's reality to get a sense of what they are dealing with. This requires a conscious connection to those around us, a thoughtfulness perspective that may not be inherent but can be developed over time with practice. As the poem *Desiderata* exhorts us, 'listen to others, even the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story', we then realize we need to be loving, kind and empathetic to all who cross our path.

## Statement of Benefits

Development of empathy and its extension to others can yield a number of significant benefits. An empathetic person will have a greater sense of awareness of what is going on in the lives of their family, friend, neighbours and co-workers, which will translate into a deeper and more sustained connection to these individuals. Over time, the extension of empathy will further build community and enrich the lives of both giver and receiver. And none of us is a rock, we will all face our challenges, and it will be during trying times that we will receive support and empathy from those we have shared these gifts with in the past. Humans are reciprocal in nature, and empathy received will translate into empathy given. And even if that is not true, we can take solace from the teaching from *A Course in Miracles*, 'All that I give is given unto myself'. If we are all connected as humans on an energetic and spiritual level, then empathy shown to others is indeed empathy that is in totality shown to ourselves.

## Suggestions for Practices Relating to Mindfulness

The following suggested practices will help you to develop a greater capacity for showing empathy, if the related modality is integrated into your daily/weekly life. A description for each of these is given in the modality description file that follows directly after this pamphlet:

- Speaking Tradition
- Handwritten Notes
- Visualization and Feeling
- Gratitude attitude
- Deep Listening
- Silence
- Heart of Peace and Joy
- Affectionate Writing
- Faster EFT
- Entraining Peace
- Empathy for Others
- Radiating Inner Love

## Summary-Starting Points

So with the practice of empathy, we shine Light onto shadows, and we shine Love onto fears. An empathetic person helps where they can, and is a role model for displaying an inner peace that goes out into the world with untold impacts. True empathy implies no judgment, which can be challenging, but is an ideal to strive for. Help and empathize, dropping judgment and criticism. *The Course in Miracles* tells us that all hearts are connected, so your loss is my loss, and your gain is my gain. So with that in hand, does it not behoove us to hold empathy as our first offering to anyone suffering around you, so that we can minimize our collective loss and maximize our collective gain?

## Closer Story

Jimmy Carter, the former peanut farmer from Plains, Georgia who became the 39<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, is an enduring model of empathy and compassion. His continuing work with Habitat for Humanity, often by swinging a hammer, reflects the little-known fact that he and his family once lived in federally-subsidized public housing. He has become known after his presidency as a conflict resolution expert, and has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. A *New Yorker* cartoon once depicted a quarreling couple, with the caption suggesting that Jimmy Carter was unavailable that evening to resolve their marital disputes. One could go a long way before finding a better example of empathy in practice than the former President of the United States who taught Sunday School well into his nineties.

