

The Road to Empathy: The Essay

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The Road to EMPATHY

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Want to learn to be empathic? I believe that more and more people will be talking about the “need for more empathy.” I believe that the primary cause of conflict both in our families, our partnerships, our business, our marriages, our political communities, our churches, and in the world in general, is a pronounced lack of reliable empathic skills. How about that for a sentence! Yet while people complain about this lack, they rarely seem to know how to teach it.

Lately I have been asked to define empathy more and more often. Fortunately, looking back on the past 15 years, I believe that I have been struggling down a long road with my wife, my children, my clients, my friends and associates – a road leading to empathic skills. So I thought I would stop a moment and share with you what I have learned.

This turned out to be fairly long article. Does that mean I think empathy is difficult? Well, yes and no. If you learned to be empathic at you father’s knee or in your mother’s arms, I think it is really simple. If your parents, like mine, didn’t know how to be empathic, you have a real journey in front of you. However, I believe that journey is finite – not endless.

Go 4 it!

Empathy and Sympathy

And before I go on, I want to be clear that empathy is not Sympathy. I believe Sympathy is that tendency to feel a feeling that is similar to what another person is feeling. If one person starts to weep, another may feel sad. If one person is Angry, others may feel anger. Certainly if one starts to feel fear, others will have their fear mechanisms start up. If you cry, about your losses, then I might cry also, but about my losses. I might say, “I share your loss,” but really I am feeling my feelings while you are feeling yours. This is sympathy. There are two experiences, yours and mine. Mine are about me and yours are about you. We are sympathetic.

Definition of Empathy

But empathy means I may help you with your anger, without me having to be angry. I relate and support you in your sadness, while I am feeling generally happy. The two worlds, yours and mine, are clearly distinct or separate. and I am aware of that. An empathic person can say, “While you are thinking that and feeling your feelings, I am over here thinking this, and feeling so-and-so.” I believe the classic definition of Empathy is something like “to be able to relate to the inner world of another person, while realizing that it is not your world.” Another definition might be “to relate to the subjectivity of another, while retaining your own subjectivity.” But what does all that mean? I intend to give you specifics, concrete definitions, so that you can recognize empathy in yourself and others, improve it yourself, and perhaps lead others to improve their empathic skills.

PreValidation – the first skill of Empathy



In my [papers on diversity](#), I speak of [PreValidation](#) as “the attitude of awareness that all people make sense before they open their mouths to tell you about it” I also share that PreValidation is any action this displays that awareness. This skill is the first concrete and visible sign that displays empathy. To [make sense](#) means to be congruent or consistent with the internal factors that lead a person

to act or react in the way that they do. (It does not have anything to do with agreeing.) I think it is easy to see that all people are congruent with themselves, and that they are never exactly congruent with anyone else, since they never share all the same internal factors. Humans, and for that matter animals, I believe, are little "sense making creatures." They always make sense, based on how they currently experience existence.

I believe that in humans, who are more complicated than mammals or reptiles, most of what we call our "experience" is really stuff going on inside our brains and our bodies – it's in our heads! We look at the world, sense it, and then use our memories in order to appreciate or understand that world. Thus "our" world, our appreciation of the "real world," is always intricately connected with all of that internal stuff – memories, beliefs, etc. Our world is never the same as the real world. When I read a paragraph from a book, I experience it and take it in, mixing it with all I already know, in order to appreciate it. Another person who reads the same paragraph, takes it in, mixes it with what they know. Now, when we come to share with each other, we share our different appreciations of the paragraph. We do not share "the" paragraph. The same is true of any experience. We witness an accident on the street. We cannot share the accident. We can share our appreciations or understandings of the accident and our appreciations or understandings will be different from each others.

The bottom line for me is the following: all people never see anything the same way. All people disagree, at some level, all the time, and all people make sense all of the time. Since all this seems true to me, then what people are doing at any moment is "their personal best." These phrases seem to capture the central principles of Empathy. An **empathic person** applies these principles both to others and to themselves.

When a person does not display awareness of these principles, I believe they are displaying non-empathy or their **empathic ignorance** – quite visibly. Sadly they will not only not see the core beauty and struggles in others, but they won't see it in themselves. Catch yourself. I suggest you be kind while you catch other people, and kind when you catch yourself. By the way, television or talk radio are great places to witness clearly non-empathic behavior.

For me the technical name for non-empathic behavior is Emotional Symbiosis, and our culture seems full of it.

"You make no sense doing that!"
 "I can't believe you did that!"
 "No one in their right mind thinks that."



"I don't see why you did that. Would you share?"
 "It surprises me that you did that.
 Must be you see something I don't."
 "I know we are both doing our best. Let's trade notes."
 "Well, everyone sees things differently."

Factors of Sense

I've learned that when people approach others with empathy, and realize that they are all so different, they will want a bit of order to deal with what can seem like chaos. For me the solution to the feeling of chaos is to create some kind of structure to contain it. In approaching people using empathy, the structures that can create comfort are "thinking models" – models of how to approach and understand others, how to make other people's actions more predictable. Fortunately as part of working with couples, I have come across a useful and relatively simple model to use – the Biological Dream. I made this model from what seems to me to be the fundamental design of all humans, and it has only five components: Safety, Reliable Membership, Diversity, Autonomy, Purpose. As I describe the components I will first state a one-line principle for each.

Safety



I have learned that all humans seek safety – lowered blood pressure, relaxed muscles, and comfort. All humans avoid, or seek to leave threat behind. People seldom leave places or relationships where they feel safe. They only leave temporarily to explore, and they return to safety after they explore for a bit. This drive for safety is the first or top component of our behavior. For example, if their need for safety conflicts with their need to feel understood, people will tend to go for the safety first.

Now, what makes one person relax (feel safe), may tense up (threaten) another person. Humans build a vast memory of the things that make them unsafe. Being aware, curious and supportive of other people's safety needs is, I believe, the first specific skill of empathy. Interestingly, one thing that people need in order to feel safe is that the people around them feel safe, too. Thus, safety is a kind of group phenomenon. "I cannot threaten myself to make you safe," or "Safety for one means safety for all!"

If a person feels or displays tension, an empathic person takes action to reduce the threat experience by the other. I didn't say "remove it." While people are learning to do new and better behaviors, they often find themselves in the presence to two threats. New things are frightening, but the old things are frightening, too. Learning something new is scary, but not learning is often scarier. Generally people will move away from what they perceive as the bigger threat. (E.g. people get drunk to avoid the pains they are feeling, even though drinking will cause some pain, too.)

The situation where this "catch 22" appears the most is, I believe, in sharing (candor, transparency) or keeping secrets (politeness, political correctness, etc) from each other. If I am thinking something, and I think it might upset (threaten their safety) someone, I have a choice. I can share it, and thus threaten their safety, or I can keep it a secret, and threaten their safety. Either is a threat. Which is the bigger threat? I find that most people experience secrecy as the bigger threat. What do you think?

An **empathic person** will be conscious of the level of safety in all people in their presence, and will be working and cooperating with reducing tensions. They will monitor themselves and others for the signals of safety and the signals of un-safety. Their response to seeing a person become tense is to ask what they can do help relax things.



"I'm tense, and you look tense. Let's slow down."
 "I hear you are scared. Let's stop for a moment.
 Is there anything I can do to help you feel safer?"

A **non-empathic person** will be in the presence of people feeling threat, and doing nothing about it. They may be intentionally threatening others. They may passively tolerate threat from others. They may have no reaction with people tense up or they may further threaten a person by, "There is nothing to be scared of."

"Stop making a fuss. There's nothing to fear."
 "No, you can't leave. You have to stay here and deal with this."
 "I may be scared, but I'll keep quiet cuz I do not want to cause conflict," he thought.

As I describe the other components of "empathic connecting" I will refer back to the issue of Safety. All people have a whole section of their brains that works on survival. This part of your brain, I call it The Lizard, may not seem very

logical at times (you have to understand how it works), but it is always present and all-powerful. Learn to cooperate with this part of one's brains.

(For more on Safety, check out my articles on it.)

Reliable Membership

I have learned that all humans require adequate, reliable, and not excessive connection with other humans. We are not designed to be alone, nor for being overwhelmed. I believe we are designed for connection – a particular type of connection, an empathic one. In addition, everyone at every moment has a level of connection that is right for him or her. When they experience too much connection, their safety mechanism kicks off, they get tense, and start withdrawing behaviors – which may mean visibly leaving or invisibly leaving by being silent and “zoning out.” When they experience too little or unreliable connection, their safety mechanism kicks off, they get tense and start clinging, pushy, or pursuing behavior. They may be unaware of all this behavior, but I think it is quite visible if you know what you are looking for.



I tend to call a person “an avoider,” when they display that they are trying to get away or to get less connection. Since all people require “not excessive” connection, everyone will be an avoider if they get too much connection. Those who require very little connection may tense and begin avoiding behavior frequently. Those who require a lot of reliable connection will tend to tense rapidly at the first sign of people leaving. Avoiders are people who often have a lengthy history of too much connection, and their bodies anticipate too much. They often appear like loners, trying to get away.

I tend to call a person “a clinger,” when they display that they are trying to get more connection. Since all people require “adequate and reliable” connection, everyone will be a clinger if they are alone enough. Those who require very little connection may have to be alone for quite a while before they feel “alone.” Those who require a lot of connection, i.e. clingers, will tend to feel alone most of the time even in a crowd. I think there is a genetic component to the level of connection needed, but experience in life has a much greater impact. Thus, I experienced myself as a significant clinger, i.e. feel alone and get tense pretty easily and quickly, as I have a lot of history of insufficient or unreliable connection as a kid. My family made fun, and shamed, my neediness. Like me, based on their life experiences, other clingers anticipate too little connection, and they often appear needy.

Let me put this into numbers. I am pretty cling-y and like about 80 units (out of 100) of contact in order to feel comfortable. If I receive 90 units, I begin to feel overloaded. If I receive 70 units, I begin to feel bored and a bit lonely. 80 is about perfect for me. Now my partner is comfortable with about 40 units of contact. 50 overload her, and 30 tend to make her feel lonely. When we come together, we experience a challenge. I cannot make her feel comfortable with my 80 units. She can't do it. But I can find multiple sources for contact, and relate to her at about her level of 40 or so.

I find this model of Reliable Connection useful in becoming empathic.

An **empathic person** will be conscious of both the level of their need for connections and that of others. They will monitor when people tense up (safety) and need more space – avoiding. They will also monitor when people tense up and need more connection – clinging. They will respond to reduce the tension by helping all people present, including themselves, in meeting their needs for connection.

If I need more space and the person I am with needs more connection, I will visibly take a break, and make an appointment to reconnect. In this way I take care of my need for lower connection, and take care of the other person's need for reliable connection. A low level person cannot ever meet the needs of a higher level person, but they can be reliable and reliably encourage their “needy” partner to take care of those high needs without threat.



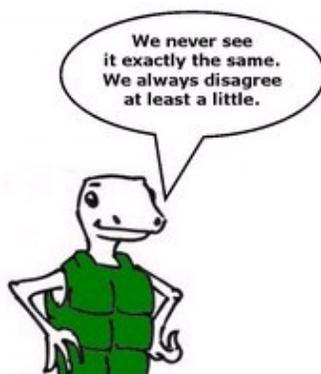
"I need some space. I will be back in 30 minutes."
 "Don't feel any rush to answer. Take your time."
 "Let's keep working on this, but not push. We'll get there!"

A **non-empathic person** will be unaware of the needs for connection or space of others. When avoiding, they will withdraw visibly without establishing a time for reconnection, or they will shut down invisibly, go silent, without letting their partner know it. On the other hand when clinging, they will continue pushing and interrogating even when they see their partner backing away. Either way they will ignore the signs of tension and act to increase, not decrease, the un-safety.

(For more on [Reliable Membership](#), check out my articles on it.)

"Answer me, now! I can't wait all day!"
 "I can't take this. I'm out of here!"
 "That's not a good answer. Tell me the truth."
 "Dammit, stop running away! We'll never get anywhere."

Diversity



As I mentioned above, I have learned that all humans experience reality differently – all the time. As we learn, our experience of reality changes. Humans always act in congruence with their current way of experiencing reality. Further, I have found that all humans (I think this is a part of [Reliable Connection and Safety](#)) desire to feel heard and to feel understood. To feel heard, I have to believe that others experience my sharing of my difference from them. To feel understood, I have to believe that others grasp my sense of things as different from their sense. [Mirroring](#) teaches the skills (a whole bunch) of making people feel heard. (There are, I am sure many other ways to learn this.) [PreValidation](#), as I mentioned before, is a skill, which can be learned, and is based on the solid awareness of all this. [Validation](#) is the act of making someone feel understood and is a straight-forward skill. I believe you can mirror anything, you can PreValidation anyone, and you can [Validate](#) anyone doing anything. Like all skills, these take practice to make them easy. (Agreeing seems to have nothing to do with Understanding. I find that to understand people, I give up any need to agree with them. Agreeing seems to be more about decision making in a group.)

Let me put this into some numbers. I experience Reality, and I use my memories in order to appreciate that Reality. My Reality is the combination of my sensing mixed with all my internal thinking about my sensing. I believe that My Reality is about 5% based on external input and 95% based on my internal thinking. When I sleep and dream, 100% of my reality is based on internal thinking. When I wake up, I "turn on" the other 5%. Watch this next sentence carefully! I experience the Reality, and I share My Reality. So does everyone else. And thus in relating to other people, I am always sharing my views and hearing them sharing their views.

When a person feels unheard, they will feel tense. Conversely, when they feel heard, they will relax. When a person feels understood, they tend to feel very relaxed – a huge sense of relief. Most people will give up any bad habits, if in return they get to feel reliably understood. When they feel misunderstood, they will feel tense. If they anticipate feeling understood, they will relax. If they expect misunderstanding, they will be in distress.

This is powerful stuff. The need for agreement or conformity in our culture, sets up enormous distress. Usually when two people say they are agreeing, one of them will be silently feeling misunderstood or silently anticipating that they will not be understood. Thus, they will experience distress, and since distress is communicated non-verbally, both will feel distress – un-safety.

An **empathic person** is conscious of everyone's need for feeling heard and understood, as well as being conscious that all people are different. They will display lively and reliable curiosity about the way other people see reality – Their Reality. They will display skills at making sure all realities are shared equally – including their own. They will tend to affirm "disagreement," in an agreeable (safe) fashion. They will tend to affirm their awareness that all people are always making sense and doing their best. They will be practitioners of the skills of verbally sharing, actively committed to all people getting to feel heard and understood. They may regularly check to see if others are feeling heard and understood. They will tend to speak up when they sense they are misunderstood.



"I know you don't see it my way. How do you see it?"
 "Of course we don't agree. But we can share." "You can either hear what I am thinking, or I can keep it a secret."
 "I love hearing about your world, even when sometimes I don't like what you say."
 Thanks for sharing."

A **non-empathic person** will tend to talk of one view of Reality as being the only view that is acceptable. They will use the words "true, right, correct, wrong, real, fact" without the qualifier "my." They will discourage, intimidate, or punish people who share seeing things differently. They will interrupt other people's sharing. Conversely, they may keep their point of view, i.e. Their Reality, a secret. They will cooperate to create "a fragile and tense" delusion of agreement.

(For more on Diversity, check out my articles on it.)

"If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything."
 "All you are talking about is bullshit. That is not how it is."
 "He/She lies all the time."
 "Stop saying that."
 "You are wrong."
 "That is not what we are talking about."

Autonomy



I have learned that all humans choose their actions and reactions, all the time. All humans "process," or think about, what they experience and determine their own response. Another way of saying this is that Humans are never obedient unless they choose, and no one can make anyone do anything or react in anyway against their will. We may look obedient for a time, but just wait for the revolution!

I think this is what makes life so much fun. Each of us is wandering around with different ways of seeing the world, and making decisions about how to act in it, and how to react to what we see. Not only that, but we are constantly learning and improving our view of the world, based on what we see and experience. We are thus constantly improving our decisions about how to best live in this world. I experience people a doing their best at all times, and always trying to do better. I believe that guilt is a particularly pernicious concept based on putting today's knowledge into yesterday's situation. I find it cruel and wasteful. Yesterday we did the best we could, as well as our best today and better tomorrow.

Autonomy is also about responsibility: yours and mine. "All people are responsible all the time," is the general rule. But each are responsible for their part – for their decisions.

PreValidation is again a great skill here. Look at someone doing something. Remember that their body, mind, soul

believe that something to be their best. Perhaps interview them to discover their beliefs and the background experiences they carry that make their actions sensible to them.

This may lead you to see that some people like doing things and making decision that you are not comfortable with. Rather than trying to change what they choose, it might be better to choose how much you want to be around them. I see this is all about boundary awareness and boundary skills.

An **empathic person** is reliably aware of all this. They reach out to understand the actions of people around them. They reach in to understand their own actions. They give other people choices, and wait to see what their choices will be. Empathic persons are self-responsible and understanding of the responsibilities of others. They respect their own choices as being their own best. They both look forward to learning better choices, and look kindly on their own past choices.



"I'd like to hear your thoughts, but am not here to be yelled at."
 "Let's share and then see if we are closer to finding common ground." "Of course, you make up your own m
 "I got upset when you said that. Don't worry, I am responsible for my own 'upset.'"
 "If you want to get angry because I don't agree, go ahead. I'll be watching TV."
 Sentences beginning with "I believe." "I think." "I recall." "I imagine."

A **non-empathic person** is judgmental and dismissive of other people's behavior. Assuming that other people see the world the same way they do, and that only one set of behaviors "make sense," they will tend to argue, push, persuade, control, revile, punish, and generally act like bullies. They may use verbal or physical intimidation. They often act either irresponsible for themselves or take on responsibility from others.

(For more on Autonomy, check out my articles on it.)

"I know I am right. You are wrong."
 "If you say that one more time, I am leaving."
 "He/She won't talk to me."
 "This is the way it is."
 "Shut up with your bullshit."
 Sentences beginning with "We..." or "You..."
 or containing the words "fact," "know," "right," "wrong," etc.

Purpose



I have learned that all people are born with some specific purpose in life, something like a "unique genius." Often we make it through childhood forgetting what our genius is. As we get older, our culture, our parents and teachers, often try to get us to do what "they" think is in our best interest. Parents often want their children to "follow in their footsteps," even though it is a hard fit for their children. Frequently people submit to these encouragements. So often, I run into people in mid-life, who are finding their lives empty – even though they are "successful" at what they are doing. Sometimes this is called a midlife crisis. It seems to happen so often in people's 40s or 50s. I then often help them "remember" what it is that they truly want to do with their lives.

What I have found is that if you are doing what you are "designed" to do, you will feel

much delight and meaning in your life. If you are not, you will feel empty, discouraged, bored, meaningless, depressed – even if your adopted career is seen as successful to others.

An **empathic person** is aware of all this both for themselves and others. They are interested in people “finding themselves.” They are open to other people being restless in their own lives, and seek to encourage reflection on following “your bliss.”

A **non-empathic person** is repeatedly encouraging people to fit in, and to find their proper “place.” They often mock the subject of Purpose as if it is selfish.

(For more on Purpose, check out my articles on it.)

Communication

Generally, I believe that empathy and non-empathy are most visible in communication styles. Any communication that cuts us off from being aware of how different others are seems visibly non-empathic. Arguing is the prime example, though the habit of interrupting comes in a close second. Political correctness, “don’t say anything that might upset someone,” and verbal pushiness seem a complete waste of time

Dialogical skills seem a wonderful example of respectful empathic connection. Mirroring teaches specifics of respect: pacing, patience, not interrupting, invitation, and relaxed listening to “anything.” PreValidation and Validation really work teaching a tone of comfort and curiosity, while reliably understanding each other’s sense. Dialogical skills seem to me to be an important contributor to developing self-esteem. Sharing differences clearly and making it easy for people to understand your motives are useful in developing speaking skills.

An **empathic person**, I believe, can be recognized easily by their ways of listening, interviewing, speaking, and encouraging a relaxing atmosphere for sharing.

A **non-empathic person** is readily noticeable by communication habits that routinely decrease the flow of sharing, while at the same time increasing tension.

(For more on Communication, check out my articles on it.)

Emotions

I spent quite a bit of my adult life trying to figure out emotions and feelings. I actually wrote my Master Degree paper on them, after long study. I am very glad I did. I find that there are at least seven problems with the topic that involve learning to be empathic. (Sorry that this part is so long.)

1. I have learned that emotions and feelings are “real” much more than thoughts are real. Yet most people I know seem to place “thinking” as more important than emotions. My dad taught me that “emotions get in the way.” I hear people say, “Don’t get emotional!” or “Don’t get carried away by your emotions!” I hear people speak of “emotional” people as if they are defective. And I have learned to consider this all examples of being uninformed.

I’ve written essays on this topic and teach it to anyone who seems uninformed and suffering because of their poor understandings of feelings. As a tiny primer, let me share what I think are critically important concepts about emotions.

- Emotions (I use the word “feeling” interchangeably with the word “emotion”.) are real events in our bodies usually involving chemicals – hormones, etc. Emotions really occur and can be measured objectively. (Try that with thoughts!) Emotions have intensity and duration.

- They are always logical products of our bodies. They are always “sensible,” though you may have to go far to understand why they occur at this specific moment.
- The general flow of events in the body are a) something (word or symbol) is perceived, b) an emotion is triggered and starts, c) the emotion, its chemistry changes the way the brain processes and remembers things, d) the brain processes are full of words and symbols that can be perceived, e) more or new emotions are triggered, f) etc. etc. Note that emotions typically come first.
- When we talk about emotions, we are speaking about what we are aware is happening in our body. We are sharing our inner physical experiences.
- These emotions, because they shift our thinking, are part of our “sense.” When you understand someone’s behavior, part of their sense are the emotions flowing in them. I think it is worth knowing that there is probably no time when emotions are not flowing in you. But there can be times when you are unaware of or misunderstanding your own emotions.
- The processes of emotions are visible to others. Babies seem to be almost completely aware of the emotions in others around them, while they have not learned yet how to interpret them. However, they can respond with their emotions to the emotions of those around them. Haven’t you seen this? A baby will often respond with distress to a parent who displays distress in their presence. A baby will often respond with joy to a parent who displays joy. Heck, we will often respond with joy to a baby that is expressing joy.
- Hiding the expression of emotions, a behavior very common in our culture, doesn’t work. People, babies, just can sense that you are hiding something and become cautious – fearful. Candor, displaying congruence between your mouth and your emotions, is part of the path to safety.

2. I have learned that most people do not know how to label their emotional experiences. So here is a brief list of what I call the primary emotions.

- Fear
- Anger
- Grief or Sadness
- Joy
- Thirst
- Hunger
- Alertness or sleepiness

The next are a list of human needs that produce varying degrees of fear or panic when they are not met. The first two are needs of mammals as well as humans. The last four seem part of being primates.

- Lonely, need for connection
- Overwhelm, need for space, or quiet
- Mis-heard, need to feel heard
- Mis-understood, need to feel understood
- Dis-respected, need to feel respected, need for value or purpose
- Sure or confident

3. Emotions have purpose, I believe. Here are my thoughts. Fear is a warning to pay attention to our need to survive. Anger raises the level of a person’s energy so that they can push through something that is blocking them from getting their needs. Grief is the process of adapting to loss. Joy is a reward for being alive. Thirst reminds us to lubricate our bodies. Hunger reminds us to feed it. Alertness reminds us to get going, and sleepiness reminds us to take a nap.

Loneliness reminds us that we need more connection with others. Need for space reminds us that we need less connection. Need to feel heard reminds us that sharing is vital to humans and we have something to share. Need to feel understood reminds us that being a full human involves self-esteem – the sharing of our purposeful existence with others. The need to feel respected reminds us that we are all equally “children of God” or “children of the cosmos.” Feeling sure or having confidence is a positive trust in our understanding of how something is going to happen or in what we need to do to make our dream come true.

4. I have learned that most people use the word “anger” when they are describing the feeling of “fear.”

5. Many emotions are expressive, i.e. they go away if expressed and they build up, if held in. I have found out that there are problems in our culture caused by both expressing and not-expressing. My experience is that non-expression eventually leads to the most trouble. Learning to safely discharge the energy in emotions seems a valuable adult behavior. I think this is especially true with the emotions of "anger" and "grief." I believe my culture (United States) has a lot of problems with people expressing these emotions and that this is a noticeable example of our cultural un-health.

6. I have learned that most people think that other people cause their feelings, when more accurately, they generate their feelings themselves. No one can make anyone feel anything.

7. Somewhere along the last 50 years, I think we have become a bit confused when talking about feelings. We say "feel that" or "feel like," when we are sharing thoughts or beliefs. Usually when someone says, "I feel that" they are leaving the feelings unshared. I think it preferable to simply use "I believe...." or "I think....." and then share the feelings that accompany the thoughts.

An **empathic person** will understand all this. They will encourage others to share and express feelings safely and effectively. They will treat emotions as a vital part of the sense that they validate in themselves and in others. They will distinguish between thinking and feelings and seek to hear about and share both. They will tend to be emotionally transparent – display candor.

A **non-empathic person** will shame or ridicule people for "having emotions." They will speak as though emotions are not part of life. Oh. I could go on forever.

(For more on Feelings and Emotions, check out my articles on it.)

Boundaries



What can I say! Boundary skills and concepts are critical to being empathic. I had to learn this. I also had to really learn boundaries. In spite of all the books written about them, I could not figure them out for the longest time. This was probably because my parents had almost no boundary skills, my friends had no boundary skills, and our culture seems to have almost no boundary skills. Eventually, when I figured out what boundaries were, I had to write my own books. There are two of them: one for individuals and one for couples. I suggest you start with the one for individuals.

An **empathic person** will reliably set and defend their own boundaries and will reliably respect other people's boundaries. Two empathic people will usually happily agree on their boundaries and on their responsibilities for defining and defending their own. This seems to me all about self-responsibility.

A **non-empathic person** will expect others to take care of them. They will blame others, when they should take responsibility for themselves. They will invade other people's boundaries and butt in. They will try to take care of things that are the responsibilities of others. They will, in general, be confused about "my" and "your" responsibility.

Healing:

Children seem to be born with a primitive type of empathy, are designed to experience empathy from their parents and to learn how to be empathic by the examples they see. However, most children, I experience, do not receive or experience that kind of parenting. For example, not receiving enough respectful attention is a major cause for becoming a panic driven clinger. Or, not receiving enough respectful space is a major cause for becoming a panic driven avoider. This lack of receiving what you need as a child I see as wounding. Wounds develop reactive patterns, or "scabs" which continue into adulthood. Most everyone I meet has a series of these wounds that erupt when poked or

triggered. These surface as [frustrations](#). Of course, the wounds need healing – understanding and remedial attention. Adulthood becomes [a time to do this work](#) and intimate relationships seem to be the focal point for such healing.

An [empathic person](#) is familiar with this concept and can reach out to understand the reactivity of their partner as the sign of old injuries as yet un-healed. They will seek to help in the healing process.

A [non-empathic person](#) will tend to see reactivity as simply inappropriate behavior and react inappropriately themselves.

Learning Empathy

Now that I have defined the various areas of empathy and pointed to articles where you can learn the concepts of empathy, let me share that I believe Empathy is a set of skills. Skills can only be learned by practice. Poor skills can only be replaced by learning and practicing new skills.

So where does a person start. Well, after many years, I believe that the keystone concept is PreValidation. So I would start there. I think everything else follows from that. Thus I would suggest that you, just as Sandra and I did, put up the sign "[All people make sense all the time](#)" on your walls in plenty of places until it becomes an automatic posture when meeting another person or when hearing about their behavior. If the idea challenges you, I would study my article on [PreValidation](#) and my [other papers on Validation](#). I would move on to the concept that "[All people are doing their best at all times](#)." I suggest you learn and practice what I call the [Odd Dialogue](#). For me it was really valuable to learn the [Biological Dream](#), so as to glimpse the many facets of humans that one can be empathic with. This may take you to learning skills of peaceful communication and [Mirroring](#) is a good place to start. (Those of you who have studied relationships and Imago Therapy, may get a kick out of my suggesting PreValidation before Mirroring!) Along the way you are going to need to learn [Boundaries](#). I don't think I "know it all." I just have been working on this for so long and have been moved to share my learnings. I believe there are many other books, articles and workshops that teach Empathy. Seek them out.

Probably another way to learn Empathy is to locate a person who is empathic, and to apprentice yourself to them –hang around them and watch what they do. (This is the easiest way, I believe. Kids are meant to learn that way. Tricky part may be in finding an available person who is a practitioner of Empathy.)

Empathic Groups: Communologue

Another way to learn Empathy is to be part of a group that teaches and models it. Elsewhere, under the topic [Peace Building](#), you will see my writings on this topic. The general idea is based on something I have discovered over and over. Empathy is more natural than non-empathic behavior. I believe non-empathy must be taught. Now, many of times I have been in a group of people doing their best and being "normally" non-empathic, for example gossiping. When one person speaks up with an example of Empathy, the whole group shifts their behavior. A non-empathic community is often "awakened" or "rocked" by the presence of Empathy. Consider Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, Dalai Lama, etc. I like to think of this effect as a [positive virus](#) – a positive, yet infectious behavior. You might try this.

[Communologue](#) is a series of principles applied in a group that maintain an empathic tone for the whole group. The trick is to find a [Communologue Guide](#) who is trained.

Specific Non-Empathic Examples

There are several situations where empathic and non-empathic behavior seem especially visible. Using Empathy and the

Diversity Principle (All People Make Sense All The Time), let's see what is going on in these tricky circumstances.

Controlling – What is going on here?

As I see it, the underlying issue in Controlling is the fear of chaos (things out of control) on the part of an individual, and their attempts to relax by "putting things in order" or "keeping things in order." When a couple comes into my office, I will look for signs of controlling behavior. If I see signs, I will both test for the underlying issue - fear of chaos, and check for the intensity of the behavior. This helps me in planning how to help the couple move toward empathic connecting with each other.

Many people come out of childhood with an acute fear of "all hell breaking loose." This, of course, is a reasonable response to the repeated experience of disorder and chaos or to being around others who are acutely fearful of chaos. In the process of their development, these people adopt ideas of what is order and what is disorder – disorder being a sign of impending chaos. I call the "ideas of order" by the name Rules. Rules being followed make a person feel safe. Rules being broken cause tension. Each person builds their own unique set of rules – the signs of safety.

A controller is a person who is attempting to relax, to feel safe, by means of keeping to their own rules, and trying to get others to follow their rules. Example: I fear losing all my money by gambling. Thus I avoid gambling, and try to stop other people from gambling.

The problem with Controlling is that people tend to drop any empathic connection with other people, and instead connect firmly to their rules. Non-empathic controlling people think that others do have and should have the same rules that they themselves have. They tend to see their tension as being caused by others. They use the words "should" and "ought" often, and speak of the "right way" to do things. Their talk is often full of MasterTalk. They often spontaneously initiate "correcting" other people – a behavior I often call butt-inski. They frequently join movements or organizations (churches) where there are lots of "rights" and "wrongs" – structure. After all, the opposite of chaos is structure and order.

They frequently enter into conflict with people who have other ideas of order, other rules. I remember working of a company that had a large computer with all the information kept in it. Reports based on that computer were used to operate the company. All was peaceful until the accounting department bought their own smaller computers and came up with different reports. People went "to war" in that company to get rid of those other computers. I recall learning at the time, "A lie is not a lie if there is only one version. If there is one version of lies – it is the truth. If there are two versions, they are both lies and there is no truth."

Empathic people will not focus on the rules, theirs or other people's. Rather they will focus on co-creating order, a sense of freedom from chaos, and safety, for everyone. My wife relaxes when our house is clean or while cleaning the house. When she is tense, I sometimes offer to clean house with her.

(Check out my paper on [Are You a Controller.](#))

Criticism, Judgementalness, Bigotry – What is going on here?

These words refer to various levels of intensity in sharing observations that "things are out of order." Usually people seem to see this behavior as light (critical), medium (judgmental), or heavy (bigotry). In all cases the situation seems the same to me. A person notes something out of order and speaks of it. Often they do this before they have any other thought of doing anything. This can be very quick. E.g. "That picture is crooked." "The furnace isn't running right." "You've not combed your hair." Remember that the underlying issue is a small or large jump in tension in the speaker.

Sometimes a person may see many things that are out of order. Sandra and I have spoken of CPMs, or Criticisms per Minute. I have heard a person speaking at the high rate of 10 CPMs. This person was pretty tense at the time. The

underlying principle is that criticism is the expression of a person noticing “something out of place” or “something that does not follow their standards” and they can be quite a lot of distress.

I've found two non-empathic responses to this. Some people will criticize the criticizer, which completely misses the point of the communicated distress. Other people, and I am one, are trained (in childhood) to interpret any form of criticism as an order to do something. If my wife says, “The garbage is full,” and I hear the echo of an order from my mom or dad that I should now take the garbage out. Thus I can react with rebellion or resistance to the “order” I hear when my partner happens to notice something “out of place” and speaks up. This can make every one tense.

An **empathic person** will tend to focus on the underlying tension or distress, in themselves or in others. And they will work toward helping their partners feel safer.

(Check out my paper on [Are You a Controller.](#))

Argument – What is going on here?

Generally I define an argument as two bullies trying to out-bully each other. ([See my paper on Master/Slave](#)) But a more empathic way is to see this as two people who really want someone to hear and respect their point of view. Now, they often come across pretty demanding and perhaps obnoxiously. But I have found that beneath that “crude” and “crusty” behavior, they just want to be heard.

Sometimes I have noticed that they seem to assume that other people really want to listen or should want to listen. I tend to think they are acting like 1 week old babies who are yelling for food. These people seem to act as if they have forgotten (temporarily) that they have grown up.

A **non-empathic person** will respond either by pretending to listen, pretending to respect those “hear-me” messages, or by walking away, or by arguing back. So silly!

An **empathic person** will respond by recognizing and respecting the other’s need to be heard. Perhaps they will [Mirror](#), use a [TimeOut](#) and schedule a time for listening. They will also respectfully protect themselves, using [Boundary Skills](#), from the obnoxious parts of the message.

Rebelliousness – What is going on here?

I see many couples who are having great troubles with their teenage children's rebelliousness. I see many individuals who are in great distress over their partner's disobedience. How silly! The United States was formed in rebellion. At the core we are a rebellious people, and many of our images are of the heroic resistance to tyranny. At the same time we attempt to bring about “order” by obedience. We go along with what other people want, for a while, and then get “fed up” and rebel. I have learned that [“all people are chronically disobedient.”](#)

A **non-empathic person** will tend to try to punish someone who is acting rebelliously. They will not notice the breath of fresh air that the rebelling person is trying to bring into some sort of tyrannical relationship or situation. They will just see the chaos of disobedience.

An **empathic person** will salute the rebel, notice and respect their initiative to not be dominated, and invite them to share in the joint responsibility for making the community strong – in a safe and empathic way.

([See my paper on Master/Slave](#))

Blaming – What is going on here?

My gosh, I see a lot of blaming. And in the long run it seems so much a waste of time. But as I look closer I do see some positive things. Here's what I see.

Blaming is the act of trying to "place responsibility" for some action onto someone. Given that definition I don't think it is a bad thing. I really like the idea of clarifying who is responsible for what. But it seems so often to be poorly expressed, and.. and... and.. so often it is used to "place responsibility" on the wrong person. I see trouble in three situations:

1. When I am frustrated, I often find myself blaming the person who did the thing I am frustrated about. This is totally foolish. 😞 My frustration, my reaction to seeing what they did, is all about me. Trying to hold them responsible for my feelings, the ones I select to have, is silly. They are responsible for what they did, and I am responsible for how I react. ([See my paper on Frustrations.](#))
2. Sometimes I try to put responsibility for something onto someone who does not want to be responsible for their actions or their reactions. I see no problem here, except perhaps in the way it is done. By the way, the person who has not learned to comfortably assume responsibility for their actions and reactions may be quite uncomfortable. And so a gentle teaching/learning tone seems wisest. 😞
3. Sometimes I try to put responsibility for something that is my doing, onto someone else, or I try to take responsibility for someone else's stuff. Either seems to me another silly thing to do. 😞

The issue of blaming is resolved by discussing and developing some [good Boundary Rules and Behaviors](#).

An **empathic person** personally and comfortably assumes responsibility for their own actions, their own reactions, their own feelings. An empathic person assumes no responsibility for another person's actions or reactions, but is available to assist others with their problems. And they competently know the difference between their areas of responsibility and that of others.

Go for it!

Skills of Empathy lead easily to the following. (just thought you might like to know.)

An enemy is someone whose story you have not heard. (Proverb)
and

*You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy."
But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:43-44).*

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you (Luke 6:27-28).

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse (Romans 12:14).

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing (1 Peter 3:9).

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble (1 John 2:9-10).

I hope all this is useful.