



Empathic Life – Authentic Living

There is a lot of talk these days about empathy. I welcome this new flurry of research activity and focus in seeking to understand empathy. However, what concerns me as a therapeutic counsellor, is the attempt by many high ranking professionals seeking to place a “cognition crown” on empathy’s majestic head. This top-down approach heavily laden with logic and order will just not do. Empathy has both masculine and feminine qualities beating quite capably at its organic heart. Attempts to parade empathy in ordered logic as the ideal state of mind not only betrays a deep wariness towards human unordered and often irrational feelings and emotions but also demonstrates a poor understanding of empathy’s true power. Viewing empathy through such a lens condemns it to exist in a restricted, incongruent and lifeless enclosure whose walls are fiercely guarded by seemingly superior reason. If this state of affairs continues to gain ground in the counselling realm, it will rip the heart out of empathic engagements. I am reminded of the late Indian history writer and teacher, Abraham Eraly, who said:

Everything was efficient and well-ordered in the Indus cities, most remarkably so, but there was little scope for artistic flourishes or individual creativity in this bloodless, precision-engineered society.

In many ways this creeping strangle hold on empathy is reflected in every-day living. For it seems to me, we are groomed from an early age not to trust how we feel. We are told that our inner world of feelings and emotions betrays us, leads us astray from our objective and thus it needs to be avoided, controlled or altogether ignored. For example, let’s take a subjective experience of watching a sunset – it is an illusion! Every informed person on Mother Earth knows only too well that the Sun does not in fact rise or set. The Sun looks like it moves because the Earth is spinning on her axis, this is an objective fact. However, no amount of data calculated rationally and scientifically as an objective fact will change the human subjective perception which we always experience first. And sunsets are as real to us as sunrises and they evoke very real feelings and emotions, thanks to which. Figures, calculations and algorithms come later and they are rarely, if ever, admired for their transcendental beauty.

Of course, there is a place for logic and order but these formulas make perfect sense on paper but hardly ever explain what life is and how it happens *in statu nascendi*. In a person to person relationship there can be no escape from the realness of encounter. Logic and our frontal lobes play an important role in human encounters but we can make use of them only if we can survive for long enough. Logic assists in responding rather than reacting in an empathic situation and in life we need to react in order to respond and that’s where emotions come in. According to neuropsychology, focused attention, a logical discipline, is but one of the five types of attention. The other four: alert, sustained, vigilant and divided attention reside in the emotional parts of our brain. Without these four types of attention on board there would be no focused attention at all. While it is true to say that elevated empathic experiences are always earthed by the demands of gravity, it is also true what Jermy Rifkin says about empathy, capturing its holistic aspects in a nutshell:

Empathy is felt and reasoned simultaneously. It is a quantum experience.

We humans are gifted with possessing *the* most highly sophisticated powerhouse of abilities on the planet – the nervous system with the most powerful brain known to

us. This highly specialised system utilises and arranges interactions between humans and the world around us. It is regulated by the constant flow of information via sensing, instinct, intuition, visceral experiences, images and perception. Being open and non-judgemental to the plethora of 'subterranean gifts', generated by new experiences, is vital to keeping our powerhouse in pristine top-notch shape. Consequently, if the nervous system is used to distort or deny perceptions and experiences, and emotions and feelings that those persecutions and experiences could/would evoke, it becomes overstressed and starts failing, and with it the zest for real, authentic life.

For empathy to thrive it must feel the pulse of emotion. Emotion is the engine where the zest for life is created. Emotion is the true touch-stone in successful empathic communication and is the gateway to authentic living. Authenticity is to empathy what water is to life. The bridge linking empathy and authenticity is called unconditional acceptance. Empathy distilled from a non-judgemental openness draws forth the clear, clean waters of authenticity in an endless cycle of rebirth and sparkling purity. Accessing the life force of authenticity is dependent upon maintaining the quality of a non-judgemental presence. Empathy and unconditional acceptance enhance one another in promoting movement towards congruent living.

Thus the first step towards an empathic life and authentic living is to take a stand. That is, take ownership of what we are experiencing and by doing so calibrate our ability to evolve fully into the unfolding moment. In counselling, as in life, limits imposed on experiencing the integral stream of our internal information system keeps human potential locked in a flat-earth landscape.

We don't always have to express verbally what we are feeling, but, as Carl Rogers phrased it, we must be open to making our feelings available to our awareness. We need to tune in and trust in our private unique frequencies and rhythms. By doing so we allow for a more confident space to bloom in which the fruits for an empathic life and authentic living can be enjoyed.

*To be faithful to that which exists nowhere but in yourself
— and thus make yourself indispensable.*

Andre Gide

Peter Ryan
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