



Three short meaningful stories from 3 categories: Home, Work, and Community

1. Empathy at Home

Deeper Connections with Friends and Loved Ones

Increasing Intimacy With One Question
Healing Power of Empathy, Pages 88-89

Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.
—Simone Weil

In my twenties, I had one particular relationship in which I became an expert at hiding pain. Conversations with my boyfriend often shifted away from my feelings and instead focused on his sadness, confusion, or defensiveness, especially if my distress had anything to do with him. I learned to cry

silently and without obvious body movement. Even while cuddling, with my back to him and his forearm cradling my head, I hid my tears along with any sorrow, confusion, or pain.

I deemed myself the silent sob master. These were my mantras in these moments: Do not let tears spill, Breathe slowly, Do not gasp for air in between silent sobs, and This too shall pass.

What a difference two decades can make. Recently, I fractured three ribs. While navigating an enormous amount of discomfort and immobility, I was lucky to be seeing a man who knew how to ask about and stay with my feelings.

A week after being injured, we lay together on my calico bedspread from India as he gently caressed my arm. Like a South Asian version of Klimt's *The Kiss*, we stayed there for some time talking and making jokes, trying not to agitate my constant hum of pain with any movement or deep laughter.

Enjoying the ebb and flow of conversation and the spaces of perfect and serene silence, I appreciated this pause from the chaos of injury, pain, and family. Tears

began to flow. And I calmly allowed myself to be seen, not that I could have moved to hide even if I tried.

New lovers can be especially nervous around tears and the possible meaning of each tear (unpredictable emotions, accusations, or problems), but this man expressed curiosity. Gently and with care, he asked, “Okay . . . what’s going on?”

I was a little unclear myself and not used to being asked. I looked within and realized they were tears of relief. The previous week had been so challenging. In that moment, I was reveling in the sweetness of his unannounced visit, the gifts of flowers and chocolates he’d brought, and his present embrace. He was unsuspectingly winning my heart.

Embarrassed, I said, “Nothing.”

He stuck with me. “Tears are always about something.”

There was something about the safety and Klimt-like entanglement of our embrace that helped me relax further into his strong arms, as he kept showing up and inquiring. So I said what I was most sure about. “It’s been a really hard week with my family here. All that family disconnection, my fractured ribs, the pain . . .” I reflected, “and it’s simply so sweet to be held by you.”

When I’m vulnerable, each gesture of holding and each curious question calms my system a little more. I become more able to receive his nourishing compassion. He relaxed into the clarity that my tears were an emotional release, not the kind that are angry or sad. He hadn’t done anything but love me in just the right way.

I nuzzled my face into his neck as he cooed a soft “aww,” and we nestled further into each other, the moment, and our sweet connection in the silence beyond our quiet breathing.

My mantra these days is that simply noticing, holding, and asking . . . can be enough.

—Sheila Menezes, www.compassionatereturn.com

(2) Empathy at Work

Creating a Culture of Compassion

A Dying Patient

pages 160-161

Healing Power of Empathy, Pages 160-161

Being aware of feelings and needs, people lose their desire to attack.

—Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

In the late 1980s, I worked as a nurse in the hospice unit of a large hospital located in an area of Vancouver that had a substantial gay population. At that time, many gay men were dying of AIDS and it was painful for the whole community. I was caring for an AIDS patient, a young man who was close to death, when I learned what a simple yet profound difference it can make when I intend to listen with my heart.

This man was in his early thirties and only a few days away from dying. While he rested on the bed, his younger brother, who couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old, was standing on the other side of the bed watching everything I did.

He said, "Why aren't you starting an IV for him?" "Why aren't you tube feeding him?" He seemed so focused on everything I was doing, and every word out of his mouth sounded like an accusation.

I could have gotten defensive, but something magical happened in that moment. I can only describe it as a moment of grace.

I heard myself say, "This must be incredibly painful for you."

Instantly, his whole demeanor softened, his energy changed, and he began to cry.

I couldn't believe how pivotal that comment was. It changed our whole day together. It was easy for me to go there as soon as I could hear what was in his heart and in the words coming out of his mouth. That moment shifted his experience too, I believe. There was no longer a focus on why I wasn't doing this or that. I hope he was able to move through the grief he was facing with a little more grace and ease.

—Anne Walton, www.chooseconnection.com

(3) Empathy in the Community

Caring for Strangers and Neighbors
Antidote to Road Rage
Healing Power of Empathy, Pages 213- 214

The ability to offer empathy to people in stressful situations can defuse potential violence.
—Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

ANTIDOTE TO ROAD RAGE

One Saturday, I was driving home along a busy two-lane highway in Arizona when a motorcycle pulled onto the road directly in front of me. It was a dirt bike and the rider was dressed in full racing leathers and a helmet. He was driving well below the speed limit and I came up behind him and followed him toward town. Suddenly, he slowed down to a crawl, traveling about five miles an hour, so I did too.

Meanwhile, the traffic backed up a long way behind me. As we approached the first traffic light entering the town, the motorcyclist pulled over. As I drove by to pass, he pulled up behind me and began following me—closely and purposefully.

I thought he might be angry at me, perhaps for following him more closely than he liked, and I didn't know what he might do. I was worried and afraid to pull over because of the potential for violence. I decided to stop near a lot of people, hoping that having witnesses might change the context of our encounter.

I stopped and the motorcyclist jumped off his bike and approached my car. As I rolled the window down, he began yelling at me and threatening to pull me out of the car and beat me. I was terrified.

I took a breath, and spoke energetically: "I get it, you're really mad. You want to be safe out there on the road."

He stopped in his tracks and took a step back. The words clearly touched him. He wasn't expecting to be heard. At that moment, the entire situation shifted.

"That's right. I do want to be safe," he said.

He took another moment to tell me his thoughts and then left. No fists were thrown and as I watched him drive away, I breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Genuine empathy is a powerful thing.
—Mark Schultz, www.nvctraining.com