

The Empathic Moment And the Empathic Response

By Dr. Janet Klein¹

Through the years, I have tried to define and describe the empathic moment and the empathic response. It is more a feeling than a definition. I will describe how I prepare for the empathic response. Then I will give imagined examples that may help you define the empathic moment for yourself and help you form the empathic response.

What I do know about the empathic moment is how important it is in shifting the nature of the relationship. Though at first it may be unfamiliar and worrisome, it is so important to stick with putting your purest energy into the empathic imagination. It isn't required that you get the image right. It is required that you get the intention and attitude right. I put all my energy into genuinely trying to get how the other person's world is for her. It is the path from the isolation of 'me' to the companionship of 'we.'

*As I just wrote those words, I imagined you, the reader, before me. And this came so I wrote it down: **Note to myself: I don't know why this image popped up in my mind. I saw myself carrying a long roll of***

¹ Note from the Editor: Dr. Janet Klein sadly passed away in 2010. Her website, her email address, and any links in this document are inactive. Questions can be directed to Barbara Dickinson as editor, barbara.j.dickinson@gmail.com

carpet. It was wilted over both sides of my shoulder. Then I saw you step in behind me and balance the end of the roll on your shoulder. We walked off in step, left, right; left, right; left, right. You started whistling a marching song, and I joined in.

Preparing for the empathic response

First, I want to say how I like to prepare myself during the session for the empathic response. I like to put out in words what it is we are about to undertake. If I am the listener I like to say something like, Could you check inside and see if this is a resting place for you, or whether you need a bit more time here. (If it is a resting place, I continue) Would it be a good time to take the empathic moment. Could each of us take a moment or two right now to get freshly what just happened. I want to get how your story is for you. ***I want to get how you are carrying all of that inside of you right now.*** Could you give me some time to sense into that. And would you like to stay with where you are right now in a caring way for yourself and what has just come. Could we take a minute or so of clock time right now.

*At this point, I try to concentrate myself to feel into the essence of the story. It is a way of clearing out whatever might come in the way of really sensing into that other person's experience. It is the effort of concentrating myself with the intention of empathically getting how it is for that other person that helps me rid myself of all the distractions that beset a listener. Note: I use the word concentrate like the word focus with a small 'f' so I won't be confusing. As I concentrate myself, I get the feeling that I am dropping down to another level inside of myself, and I wait there to see what new will come. Something I know is that ***I don't want to summarize what the storyteller just said.*** And I want it to be like a concentrate, brief and potent. I want to give my empathic imagination free rein. I want to intentionally employ empathic understanding.*

Note: I am using imagined recreations of examples so I won't breach confidentiality.

Example 1 – Empathic Moment as Image:

I was listening to an Interaction about one woman's struggle to be seen. She seemed invisible at her workplace, passed over for promotion time and again. She was tired of this to the point of breaking. Yet, she had gained so many skills. This is what she knew how to do. She felt trapped between wanting to quit and wanting to advance. She was stuck.

Empathic response as an iconic²[1] image–

I told her that the image of the llama in Dr Dolittle came to me. It was the double headed Pushmi-Pullyu³[2]. Both heads were talking at once so I couldn't make sense of it until they quieted down and took turns talking.

²[1] i·con *n* a picture or symbol that is universally recognized to be representative of something

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³[2] The **pushmi-pullyu** (pronounced "push-me-pull-you") is an antelope/unicorn which has two heads at opposite ends of the body. When it tries to move, both heads try to go in opposite directions. Dr. Dolittle meets it on his voyage to Africa to save monkeys (See: *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*). In the 1967 film, the pushmi-pullyu was instead portrayed as a double-headed llama.

It was brief, and I offered this wondering if it would fit. She smiled and said, that's it exactly. I let them both crowd in on me. I don't really listen to myself in all of this. I am being pulled apart. I need to muffle them. I need to find a way to listen to myself in all of this. What do I want.

Comment:

This didn't necessarily offer her a solution. It did offer her some clarity. She seemed to intuit she needed to clear a space before she could start her work. She had taken a small step. And, most important, she felt the company of someone who understood and cared about her.

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Example 2 – Empathic Moment as Story :

A middle-aged man related a story about his disappointment in life. He hadn't yet found something he loved doing. He felt time was running out on him. He was a lawyer and made a good income, but he was bored. It wasn't that he had a burning desire to do something else in particular. He was just dissatisfied, bored; he felt dead inside. He wanted to be a responsible husband and father because his own father had deserted the family when he was only seven. He vowed he would never do this to his children. Even though he had been greatly wounded by his father's leaving, he still spoke of his father lovingly.

Empathic response as brief story (separate from the one just heard) –

My mind said 'quicksand.' And I was thinking I should have a picture in my mind of him sinking into quicksand; that I would sense him being sucked under. But I didn't. Instead, a story my daughter told me the

previous week came to mind. I struggled with this as I didn't quite see the fit. And still, *I felt the fit* so all I could do was offer this.

I told him: Last week, my little, six-year-old granddaughter woke early in the morning and climbed into bed with her Mama. As she sleepily snuggled under the covers she said, I have to go back to sleep so I can finish my dream.

He teared up and said, Before my father ran off, I used to hop into bed with my mother and father. We would hug and tickle. I don't do that with my children. That's what my life is missing. I'm so busy trying to be a 'reliable provider' that I don't make time to be a father. I don't think it is the law that is so boring. It is the way I go about it. I feel like a robot. I'm boring. I need to change. I need to bring some life into my life. I'm that little kid who wants to snuggle in and finish my dream. He said with a sigh, I haven't felt that in a long time. I haven't **felt** in a long, long time.

Comment:

*When I think back on this, I don't think it was any prescient knowing that this man wanted and needed the warmth and aliveness he knew as a child. It was just that his story touched on the same feeling I had when I heard the story about my grandchild and her simple **wanting**.*

Example 3 – Empathic Moment as Metaphor:

She had been out of work for some time. She was neatly dressed though threadbare and obviously depressed. She had been a mid-level executive for a real estate firm. Now, she was on food stamps. I was

doing my internship at a community mental health center. She wasn't paying for the service. I worried that she wouldn't find the therapy of value because we budding therapists had been forewarned that we must charge something or our clients wouldn't take the work seriously.

She told a similar story each time I saw her, about losing her job, not finding another, sending out resumes, making appointments for job interviews, losing her friends, the shame of food stamps. I listened for several sessions feeling quite inadequate. I was sure that if I were a better listener, she would be a better client. We weren't making progress. I wondered why she continued to return. When I tried to empathically get how she was experiencing all of this, I came up with a metaphor. I wasn't sure whether it was about her or me. Nonetheless, I ventured to tell her how I sensed her predicament felt to her.

Empathic response as metaphor⁴[3] or simile⁵[4]–

⁴[3] met·a·phor n

1. the application of a word or phrase to somebody or something that is not meant literally but to make a comparison, for example, saying that somebody is a snake.

See also mixed metaphor

See also simile

2. all language that involves figures of speech or symbolism and does not literally represent real things

3. one thing used or considered to represent another

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⁵[4] A simile shares features of a metaphor but usually starts with 'as if' or 'like.'

I told her, I get the sense it's as if you're in a rowboat. You are pulling hard, very hard. But one of your oars has broken off. I stopped there. I didn't want to try to tell her how to fix her oar.

She responded very simply and quietly, Yes, I'm going around in circles. It was the first time I heard genuine emotion in her voice.

Comment:

I hadn't wanted to confront her with the fact that she was repeating herself. It had become boring for me, and I could see why her friends were tiring of her. My not telling her she was boring, but letting her interpret the simile herself was gentle. And she understood that going around in that circle kept her stuck. She seemed to straighten up and find some direction. Her coming to it herself seemed empowering.

She returned for two more sessions after that. Her eyes had some sparkle to them. She told me of a plan she had to start a new business. I didn't see her professionally after that; however, I did bump into her at a store some months later. She told me she was off food stamps. She wasn't making a lot of money, but enough to pay the rent and put food on the table. We chatted for a few minutes. She thanked me and said good bye.

I wasn't sure why she was thanking me. On the other hand, I have personally experienced how powerful it is to feel understood by at least one person.

When the empathic response doesn't seem to fit

I am experienced in offering the empathic response. Yet, sometimes the storyteller doesn't get the sense that my empathic response is on target for her. When I notice a hesitance in the storyteller, I suspect that I might be off. Then I ask, Could you check to see if I've gotten how it is for you.

The important thing here is to listen carefully to the storyteller who can help bring you into empathic alignment. The feedback loop of storyteller-as-teacher gives us a second chance. Our intention is to be empathic, not to be right. Don't let hubris or criticism sensitivity come in the way of humility. It is a relief, for me, to think that I might not empathically imagine the response that fits the storyteller, but she will generously offer to help me get how she is carrying her story in the moment.

Empathic moment as concentrate or distillation^{6[5]}–

In the early days of the Interactive, Dr Rob Berry (Certified Focusing Coordinator from Illinois) and I offered workshops for the Interactive. A description of the empathic moment he formulated was something like the distillation one might have which captures the essence of the story just heard. He talked about a funnel. The story part was all the material poured into the top of the funnel. He indicated the Empathic Moment was the concentrate that dripped out the bottom of the

^{6[5]} dis·til·la·tion n

1. the process of separating, concentrating, or purifying liquid by boiling it and then condensing the resulting vapor.
2. something that consists of the essential points, aspects, or implications of something larger or longer

funnel. The image I always had when listening to Rob describe the empathic moment was of a can of concentrated orange juice. The story was the orange juice. I imagined fresh-squeezed orange juice with the water being extracted leaving that thick and potent residue or concentrate we find in the freezer at the grocery store.

Well, that's almost always how I imagined it. Sometimes it was in the backwoods of Kentucky or Tennessee with bearded men making moonshine. I could see their still steaming away. These images have stuck with me. Both of these indicate that the Empathic Moment comes directly from the story just told. That it is brief. That it isn't a retelling of the story. That it has the power of metaphor or a Japanese haiku poem.

Haiku⁷[6] is the quality I think about when I imagine the empathic response.

The pitfall of repetition

When I was studying for my own doctorate, I was writing a paper on empathy. Could we teach empathy using the felt sense was the topic. I remember reading a passage from a book by Daniel Stern⁸[7]. He said that the infant felt empathically heard, not when the mother repeated the word or gesture the baby just made. The baby felt understood when the mother made a similar gesture or made a similar sound with

⁷[6] Haiku, Japanese verse form, notable for its compression and suggestiveness. It consists of three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables

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⁸[7] *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Development* (1985) and (1998) by Daniel Stern.

the same feel quality the baby just used. This is why I advise against recapping the story just heard during the Empathic Moment. Repeating it or summarizing it simply means you have a good memory. Unfortunately, you will be experienced as if you were a parrot.

It helps if the Empathic Response is pithy, often filled with images from all the senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) and, importantly, comes from visiting your felt sense with the honest intention of using your empathic imagination in a very caring and respectful way. As the listener, take some time here. And while you take time to sense into your inner knowing, invite your storyteller to stay with that just revealed place in a caring way.

Latest iteration⁹[8]:

I will finish with where I am now in my understanding of the empathic moment. I tell myself this isn't a good idea. It will complicate something I want to make elegantly simple. But here it is anyway hoping that enough of you will understand it to let me feel understood. This is the image:

The moment stories click together:

The phrase, *our stories keep one another company* keeps coming back to me. It seems that it is the *empathic moment that binds our stories together* and that is when we feel connection. I sense that moment as a clicking together. I was telling someone how that was for me, and

⁹[8] it·er·a·tion *n*

1. an instance or the act of doing something again.

reached out to shake his hand using an unusual kind of handshake. It wasn't the typical handshake, palm to palm. It was with fingers curled, making two 'U' shapes, fingertips buried into the palm of the other. It was firm and difficult to separate. The stories hooked together. The people hooked together. The circle is complete. We make a whole.

Sardining:

The other thing that has come recently is the image of a can of sardines with the sardines carefully and comfortably packed in, one touching the next. I have been writing about our stories keeping one another company, recently. I check inside and say to myself, what is inside of me right now. And there are all those stories sardining inside of me bringing with them the memories and feel quality of my friends and their stories. This protects me from loneliness, and it helps me move forward on my path of life.

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