

“...the child’s capabilities and sense of well-being deepen in proportion to the individual’s ability to bring his or her [self] into a condition of rapt attention...”
-Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle

The Anatomy of Internal Field:

Empathy

By George M. Prince

In *The Once and Future King*, the story about King Arthur of the Round Table by E.B. White, Merlin, the magician, is charged with educating the future king, who is known as Wart. He changes Wart into a small animal to give him the knowledge of what it is like to be hunted. Then he changes him into a bird so that he can experience the fears and joys—the meanings of that way of being. This is the ultimate identification—actually becoming the creature. It equips Wart to experience empathy later, that is, to know intimately the thoughts, feelings, and meanings of being another without losing himself and *his* thoughts, feelings, and meanings.

Empathy is one of the three critical elements of field that supports collaboration with others. The other two elements, as we have mentioned, are self-awareness and integrity.

Merlin wanted to prevent Wart from suffering the “king” disease—the tendency of persons in power to become isolated from and immune to the human needs and desires of others. As Lord Acton said, “Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Empathy is the antidote to the blindness that goes with the need to exert power—over and control. It is a receptivity that enables me to synchronize with the field of another and produce true synergy. Empathy, self-awareness and integrity are the pivotal elements in great partnerships, great marriages, great friendships, great companies, and in raising great children.

Empathy is an exploring, learning capacity—the means of arriving at a deep understanding of a person and even of a thing. For example, Carl Marden, one of the founders of Syntectics®, was a gifted machinist and inventor. When he was struggling to make a new device work, I often heard him say things like “This valve doesn’t want to close against that pressure....”. He was empathizing with that valve to understand how to help it do what it needed to do for the device to work properly.

An example of a whole group using empathy to create a field of understanding for each other occurs in the New Guinea tribe called the Foré. (Smithsonian Institute Magazine, May, 1977, Pg.107). The anthropologists who studied them marveled at their openness, harmony, learning ability, lack of sibling rivalry, and general well being. They had achieved a high level of mutual regard and equality. One of the traits most valued among them was the ability to guess how another was feeling and, for example, bring a drink of water before the thirsty one realized that was exactly what she wanted

They have no equivalent of our notion of punishment and I wondered if, when there is true empathy there is no inclination to punish.

“To grasp the meaning of a thing, an event, or a situation is to see it in its *relations* to other things.”—John Dewey

Webster defines empathy as "The imaginative projection of a subjective state into an object (or person) so that it appears to be infused with (my sensibilities) or the capacity for participating in or a vicarious

Experiencing of another's feelings, volitions or ideas and sometimes another's movements.

This capacity to accurately create in myself the feelings, perceptions, desires and thoughts—the meanings— of another is one of the most important skills I can develop. It transforms the connectivity of my field for another and makes mutuality possible. To the degree I fail to develop my capacity for empathy, I am doomed to a life of isolation and incomprehension. I cannot create an engaging field without it.

Empathy and Identification

There is a critical difference between empathy and identification. In empathy, I retain my own identity, thoughts and feelings—my integrity. I recreate yours as I *imagine them* to be, but I do not lose touch with my differentiated self. When I *identify* with you, I imagine that I *am* you. I fuse with you and lose touch with my separate feelings and thoughts.

In empathy I accept the meaning you are conveying even though it differs from my own. I am able to think “as if” I were you. As I listen to you, I temporarily put my own meaning on “hold” so that it does not prevent me from really connecting with and comprehending yours.

In the developmental years of my childhood, it is appropriate for me to identify with parents and others from whom I learn. It is the central task of my youth and young adulthood to increase my capacity to be autonomous: self-governed and self-validating; to differentiate and become my own integrated person—to gradually shift from identification and dependence to empathy and independence.

Necessary Conditions

Empathy requires unconditional, wholehearted listening, that is, listening without the defensive barrier of my assumptions and prejudices. Three conditions make this possible. First, I need to be healthily differentiated, confident enough in my own basic beliefs and principles that I will not be threatened and become defensive by understanding those of another.

“Creative fidelity means to bear with their plateaus, regressions, imperfectness in such a way that these are transformed into new possibilities. Creative fidelity is to be for and with them, come hell or high water.”—Ross Snyder

Second, if I am imperfectly differentiated, as most of us are, I need assurance that it is safe for me to relax my defenses and temporarily put aside my own best interests. No one will attempt to persuade or coerce me away from my point of view. Neither of these conditions is realistically completely possible so a third necessary condition is that I have enough trust in my own integrity and sense of self (awareness) that I am willing to risk the danger of giving up a position and being changed.

Empathy and Perception/Connecting

This phenomenon occurs when I have reached a point of minimal defense in relationship to another. I am able to give myself without reserve to the activity of making myself available to the total field of another without losing touch with myself. I know when I am approaching this level of attention because my anxiety gradient will urge me to cover up: make judgments, take control, feel bored, impatient, angry or otherwise defend my self from being taken over. When I summon up my courage to be with another in this wholehearted way, a remarkable transformation in field can occur. We together bring into being a field that glorifies and honors each other's real selves. We can experience a jolt of exhilarating positive energy as we release ourselves from the need to defend. The revelation of the richness of our undefended selves can be a truly blissful experience.

Realistically there are many people who are so heavily defended that when I reveal my availability they are impelled to deal with it as weakness. In such a case, my anxiety gradient urges me to raise my own defenses and strike back. If I have the courage to self-soothe, I can resist getting hooked, not respond in kind, and shift the interaction to the level of openness that is appropriate for such an anxiety-governed person.

In my experience, if I am able to contain my own defensiveness and be as available as such a person can tolerate, I may be rewarded with a growing relaxation of his defenses against me.

The Practice of Wholehearted Listening

I develop my capacity to listen wholeheartedly by inventing a step-by-step process to help me be more available to perceive and connect. Here, by way of example, is my process:

Milton Erikson's principle of mutuality: a relationship in which participants depend on each other for the development of their respective strengths.

1. Tom is not in any way an enemy—for this time he has no power-over me. We are not deciding anything.

2. I focus my total attention on Tom. I go with the images and feelings Tom is activating in my head and heart. I use his statements as metaphors if necessary to make connections.
3. I will welcome the anxiety I feel. It is part of my aliveness. I will not let it enforce aloneness.
4. When a fear/defense rears its head, I mentally nod and say, “I feel your signals. We will review this later”.
5. I *loan my powers and myself* to Tom. I am wide open to the waves of his field—the visible and the invisible. I put my imagination at his disposal. I may need to ask him to say more about some aspect.
6. I interact from wherever I find myself. This is still exploration time. We take turns exploring until we agree to decide something
7. When decision time comes, I introduce my preference by saying “This is what I am wishing for...”

Empathy and Synergy

My study of creativity in invention groups has led me to discover another dimension of empathy: when we have a common vision, and I listen to you wholeheartedly as described above, my acceptance and honoring of your thinking opens my resources to connect with and build upon the wishful meaning behind your thinking. We become more than the rational sum of one plus one. When a group achieves this quality of interaction, entirely new levels of originality can occur.

Empathic Wholehearted Listening to Self

One of the extraordinary benefits of learning to listen to others wholeheartedly is that it can become the path to listening to myself in the same way. Surprising, as it may seem, unless specially trained, I am not an empathic, wholehearted listener to myself. My inner field, as we will see in the section on Self–Punishment and Synergy, is not supportive in the total sense needed for synergy.

“...intimacy is the process of being in touch with or knowing <i>oneself</i> in the presence of a partner.”—David Schnarch
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Empathy and Genius

When all the individuals in a group are skillful at empathic, wholehearted listening *and at* maintaining *the field that fosters it*, it becomes possible for them to multiply the capacity

for connection—making almost exponentially. When thoroughly developed, such a group may well be able to replicate the thinking of a genius.

“In his 1988 book, *Scientific Genius* [Dean Keith] Simonton suggests that geniuses are geniuses because they form more novel combinations than the merely talented” (Newsweek, June 28, 1993).

“...iconoclasm disposes geniuses to *entertain* permutations of images and memories that more mundane thinkers toss out as too loopy. Similarly, creative geniuses are willing to take intellectual risks by merging disparate ideas.” (Ibid. italics mine)

Empathy and Self-Disclosure

As discussed before, early humiliations have taught me that it is dangerous to self-disclose and I have a well-established policy to present only my competitive image. Empathy on the part of another is a strong inducement to unfreeze. When all members of a group repeatedly evidence their empathy for one another, self-disclosure flourishes and I am able to experience those exhilarating moments of connecting with unforeseen, richly meaningful elements of myself and unexpected treasures in others.

Practical Intimacy TM

Practical intimacy is not that which is sometimes achieved by loving couples, where the deepest secrets of the heart may be explored, but it is a state of mind and emotion in which I have the courage to be unrehearsed and undefended. This is a field that invites me to interact with whatever is emerging, unencumbered by old convictions, open to new connections.

“Does the relationship leave [the parties to it] with feelings of increased strength and value, or of weakness and self-rejection? All human relationships can be judged by this one criterion.” —Milton Erikson

Narcissism and Empathy

I have been puzzled about why some people do not seem willing to experience empathy. M. Scott Peck suggests a reason: “...we are all born narcissists...if we are supported through the natural humiliations of childhood by our parents and by grace...we gradually grow out of it.

“...narcissists do not think clearly about other people—if they think of them at all” (1993, Pg. 109).

My journey from being thoughtless of others to identification to empathy is uncertain. I do not learn it like math or spelling. The Stone Center at Wellesley has studied this process. The Center is dedicated to the study of women’s developmental path to discover how it might be different from that of men. One of the central differences they see is the shift in a boy’s identification that happens at about

age three. Then a boy begins to focus on father and maleness, while girls continue to develop interrelating skills with mother.

Dr. Stephen Bergman, at a Stone Center Colloquium in 1990, said, “Male psychology becomes fixated on achieving a separate and individuated self, what Joe Pleck calls ‘male sex–role identity.’ Self is based on separation from others and self–other–differentiation, self–*versus*–other which may then become self–*over*–other.”

Dr. Bergman goes on to say that this shift is not “separating from the mother” or “disconnecting from the mother”, it is a *disconnecting from the very process of growth in relationship*, a learning about *turning away from the whole relational mode*.”

The male model with its emphasis on rugged individualism, strength, dominance, and competition does not put much emphasis on attending to the thoughts and feelings of others. It almost seems like deliberate training in narcissism and therefore training away from empathy and toward power–over. Women are more fortunate in that the development of their relationship skills, of which empathy is chief, is uninterrupted throughout childhood.