

# THE INTERACTIVE METHOD

*THE PATH OF HEALING  
THROUGH EMPATHY AND COMPASSION*

COMBINED EDITION

VOLUME ONE: THE PROCESS

VOLUME TWO: APPLICATIONS

VOLUME THREE: OUT OF THE PRACTICE

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## The Full Circle of Empathy

### The empathic moment, a brief history-

After some basic ground work was done on the Interactive Focusing model, I recognized a big piece was still needed. This interactive model was pointing more and more in the direction of not just a communication model; it was developing as a model with the intention and capability of teaching empathy and compassion.

The idea behind reflective responding, the basic listening mode in Focusing exchanges, was to *intend* to listen empathically. There is nothing intrinsic, however, about reflective responding that implies empathic listening. We were using reflective responding, also, as our basic listening mode in Interactive Focusing. Realizing this lack, we added a feature called Focuser-as-teacher or storyteller-as-teacher. This feature had the person telling the story give the listener feedback to help her be a more empathic and compassionate listener. This was working beautifully. Still, something was missing.

Someone who was acknowledged to be a very skillful, compassionate and empathic listener was Mary McGuire, longtime director of the Focusing Institute. We all observed her and tried to learn from her. Still there was something illusive there. And the hunt for empathy continued.

After a trip to Toronto in 1993 to conduct an Interactive Focusing workshop with Kevin McEvenue and Paul Huschilt, I made a discovery about something I named the "empathic moment." It was simply that we needed to take an isolated *moment* to recapture the storyteller's experience in an *intentionally empathic* way. I was coaching Kevin and Paul in an interaction when I realized that there was a very poignant point where they seemed to have come to a moment of shared empathy. I asked them to take time there just to be with each other to receive what had just come.

I came back from Toronto excited but apprehensive about telling Mary of my discovery. At first, she was dismissive of the notion saying that is what she did all the time she was reflecting. She was taking the story in and listening empathically. She was, however, willing to try this new step. In the beginning it was awkward for her. It seemed to draw her back from the edge where she was in her listening. As she used it more, she became convinced of its usefulness and finally became a convert.

Mary acknowledged that she was a very seasoned and skilled, empathic listener. What she did intuitively, others might find difficult if not impossible. It seemed that we finally had a way of teaching what Mary did intuitively, to listen empathically. Now the rest of us could begin to master a

very difficult developmental step, empathy. Even later, Mary realized that the empathic moment brought something new to listening, not just a way to teach what she did.

#### **The empathic moment-**

The empathic moment now had a very distinct place and shape in the Interactive Focusing process. After the storyteller told a piece of her story and felt adequately heard, a discreet step was taken where the listener went down inside to once more try to get the story empathically and compassionately. The process at this point in history, in summary: 1. The storyteller tells her story, 2. The listener selects a reflection using his bodysense, 3. The storyteller resonates the reflection and gives the listener any feedback required, 4. The storyteller senses she has finished a piece of the story and 5. The listener takes a moment to empathically get how the experience is for the storyteller. This is the *empathic moment*. The listener then shares with the storyteller what came for him when he tried to get empathically how it was for the storyteller. The storyteller takes that in, resonates it and gives feedback to help the listener come into as close an empathic alignment as possible.

#### **A second discovery about the empathic moment-**

A long while after I discovered and described the empathic moment, I discovered a new piece...again, out of the practice of the Interactive Focusing model. This piece occurs simultaneously for the listener and the storyteller at the *empathic moment*. Perhaps it was happening in me all along, subliminally, but it finally came to consciousness, and I have now named it...the *double empathic moment*. This is *self-empathy*, of course, dosed with a healthy portion of *self-compassion*. It makes sense that the steps of discovering empathy came to me in this particular order which follows a natural, developmental sequence.

I believe that self-empathy and self-compassion follow a certain developmental course of 1. receiving empathy and compassion from others, 2. learning from this modeling to give empathy and compassion to others and 3. giving empathy and compassion to yourself. I have examined this developmental line in my article *Teaching Focusing the Way We Can Best Learn It*.

#### **The complexity of the empathic moment-**

Once I discovered the power of this new step, I began taking the time set aside in the process for the empathic moment to take an *empathic moment with myself*. Typically, when the empathic moment comes in the process, the listener will take some time to drop down inside to see if she is getting the

story the way the storyteller experienced it. This is how we have defined the empathic moment, the time for the listener to try to get how this story is being experienced by the storyteller. There is a pause in the interaction while this is being completed. The listener becomes quiet for a few moments to sense deeply into an empathic hearing of the storyteller's experience.

There was no defined task here for the storyteller. I would just wait. Now I no longer wait passively or even intently to see what the listener comes to. It is during this time that I take time with myself to be empathic toward myself. I try to sense how the whole of this piece of my story is for me, especially because this is a newly arrived at moment. I have just shared with my listener all about where I am with my issue. Some new part may have broken loose. Something may have revealed itself in that moment. I make an internal step. Something new has been named – something comes clear – something comes into focus. I am at a whole new place. I actually check in with myself now, in this moment of vision, in a new way – empathically – or perhaps more accurately, self-empathically.

**The completed circle: receiving empathy from another, having empathy for another, giving empathy to oneself-**

To complete *the circle of empathy*, it was necessary to introduce self-empathy into the Interactive Focusing model – as a separate piece that can be marked and practiced. It happened for me spontaneously. One day it was just there. This spontaneous arrival of self-empathy during an Interactive session leads me to conclude that self-empathy is a natural, developmental process – one that has dropped out of our *repertoire* due to lack of practice and use, and/or one that has been trained out of us on the quasi-religious grounds of the “sinful acts of selfishness and the sublime and redeeming acts of altruism.” Of course, altruism and self-care are not mutually exclusive. A healthy balance is necessary for full living. I am reminded here of one of my favorite quotes: *If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am not for others, what am I? If not now, when? (Rabbi Hillel the Elder, First century B.C.E.)*

From my own work on my inner child, I recognize when I need to become caring and gentle with a sore place in myself. This is compassion and self-care. This I knew, and I knew how to do it. Self-empathy was something about which I had not yet become aware. Perhaps because of this I have been deeply affected by my discovery of the other side of the empathic moment – *how I perceive I am experiencing my own experience*. I stay in the caring attitude – or I receive myself in a caring way. And I try to empathically understand my newly revealed self – with compassion.

**Inviting self-empathy into the empathic moment-**

This is an invitation for the storyteller to take some time to get how that is for her in the moment, including an instruction to be gentle with herself, to be with herself in a right way. As storyteller, I might say something to myself like, "Can you take a moment to be with yourself to see what all of that is for you, how you are carrying all of this right now, how you are with all of that? Can you be gentle with yourself?" If I were a coach I would say much the same thing to both the storyteller and the listener.

**The double empathic moment summarized-**

This *double empathic moment* has been a discovery and a new piece added to the Interactive Focusing model. There is a new round of sharing here. It goes like this: 1. The empathic moment has been called for. 2. The listener is taking time silently inside to sense empathically how it was for the storyteller, how the storyteller has experienced her story. 3. *The storyteller uses this same time to sense how her own story has been for herself* (the newly added piece). 4. The listener shares the empathic response – what has come inside her about how the storyteller has experienced her story. 5. The storyteller resonates the listener's empathic response here and gives the listener feedback about the listener's empathic response. Feedback at this point can really fine-tune the empathic connection. 6. The storyteller shares what came for her in her own empathic moment, when she went inside to get a fresh sense of how her story is for her in this new moment, empathically and compassionately.

**A pre-requisite: knowing how to resonate and teach from that-**

As you can see, this relies heavily on knowing the storyteller-as-teacher model. It relies on the storyteller resonating the listener's empathic response against what is there in the storyteller in that simultaneously taken empathic moment. It relies on the storyteller's feedback to bring the storyteller and listener closer together in their empathic understanding. It helps the storyteller and listener come clearer, into focus in a very precise and well-defined way.

By sharing deeply the truth in the moment, a very powerful connection is formed – the energy field becomes a synergy field, that is, there is more present than two individuals. And that is empathy.

**A chance to augment the process in the *double empathic moment*-**

What I have noticed when I am the storyteller is that taking this moment for myself helps me take a large step forward, almost a leap in terms of where I am in my process. I not only sense my listener is with me empathically, but an insight, an action step, a clearing forms. And I feel differently about myself.

When I am the listener an equally large step comes. With the empathy comes a feeling of deep connection. I feel differently about the storyteller. I now listen from a completely new place. The following excerpt from an Interactive session hopefully will give you a concrete sense of what this new piece is and how this happens.

**An interaction illustrating the *double empathic moment*-**

I started the interaction. I was the first storyteller, and Kevin McEvenue was my listener. I told a *story* about how stuck I have felt much of my life and how this stuckness has kept me away from moving forward in my life in a joyous and fulfilled way. It was an old thing, all about my relationship with work.

What came clear to me was *my doing* anything is always contaminated by my early experience of *doing* which I associated with a job I had as a youth working in my parents' grocery store. I wrapped meat during my high school summer breaks. I wrapped meat isolated in a cold, white, antiseptic room for eight hours a day, five days a week for much of my summer vacation. I came to dread this experience for its monotony and came to look on it as an imprisonment, one that because of obligation and need, I couldn't escape. Subsequently I yoked work with that dread of boredom and confinement. Even when I had work experiences I enjoyed, it was tinged with my early, negative experience of "work."

Kevin reflected my story, piece by piece. As I took it back inside, what came to me was my inability to separate this negative experience of "work" from anything and everything I *did*. *Doing* became inseparably entangled with this early work experience. Any time I had to *do* something, a leaden feeling overtook me. It felt as though I had swallowed cement, and it had hardened in my gullet. At the same time I felt a "zzzzzz-zing" sensation in my body as though my motor were going full throttle, but I wasn't moving. It was uncomfortable, tearfully frustrating and distressing. And it left in me a sense of one of the seven deadly sins, *sloth*.

It didn't make sense. Here I was, a woman who had raised a family, had been successful in business, had retired early and recycled to take a doctoral degree in psychology, had discovered a unique psychological/communication process that was being found useful in the world – and I felt at a very deep level of *myself* that I was lazy – and that this very laziness or sloth was keeping me from discovering and enjoying my own bliss.

This was my story. Kevin reflected back the parts of my story. I resonated the reflections and gave Kevin feedback. I came to a place where I

wanted the empathic moment taken, I wanted to hear from Kevin how he sensed my story was for me. While Kevin was taking a moment to get it empathically, I sensed how I was inside with my own story. This is an excerpt from the session and that moment we took together...that *double empathic moment*.

**Transcript of the double empathic moment:**

**J:** (*Leading into the empathic moment*) I just want to take a moment here because I actually got to a place I hadn't seen before...that when I start [doing] anything now, even those things I love to do, that leadenness comes in that is connected with...that hour after hour of meat wrapping...that I have to do this, this is my job, this is what I should be doing. I can't get the two separated.

**K:** Mmm. That's where you are...

**J:** And just saying that, just coming to...it's got nothing to do with this thing I love to do. It's got to do with what I'm bringing...this sense of...it'll look like work, and then it'll feel like wrapping meat.

**K:** Mmm, yeah.

**J:** (*Here I request the empathic moment from Kevin*) Yeah...so (sigh) just to be with that is a good point...just asking you (chuckle) if it's right for you to just...to maybe sit with me with that for a moment...and then...mmm...if you could maybe...somehow you could say how you feel that is for me...how you sense I'm experiencing it.

**K:** (*Long, audible in-breath, followed by twenty-five seconds of silence*) Several words come and...the first word that came is a sense of (*breath*)...discovery. And then it was embellished a little bit, or changed a little bit. There was a delight in the knowing it even though the knowing is about a stuck place...there is a (*breath*) "Yeah, that's what's there."

**J:** Um hum.

**K:** A sort of delight in the knowing that's there.

**J:** Um hum.

**K:** (*Kevin asks me to resonate his empathic response against what is in me*) Just see if that fits where you are with this...or maybe there is something more there or something else that's there.

**J:** Yeah. It, um...when I got that, that I can't separate the two...just knowing that was a relief. (*I give Kevin feedback. What is there in that moment is "relief." I'm not aware of the "delight of the discovery" at this point.*)

**K:** Hmm. A relief. (*Kevin accepts the feedback and adjusts his response.*)

**J:** Yeah.

**K:** That's the word, relief. There's a relief in you.

**J:** Yeah. And so when I got it and I felt that sense of relief, I just wanted to...to make some room to sense it more fully. But as I was waiting and just being with myself while you were checking in to see...you got the first part that...but, for me, there was more relief than delight (*Feedback to Kevin that I sensed he heard how it was for me. Rather than stay with the story about inability to separate my old sense of leadiness around meat-wrapping and anything I was "doing" currently, both of us sensed how it was in this new moment for me.*), but it was really around that moment of recognizing aha...that's...that's what's got me so trapped. (*This starts the part I share with Kevin about what happened when I took an Empathic Moment for myself.*) And what came after that was a real...sadness for myself...that...I get into this. I let this...or somehow it takes me over. And just a wanting to hold myself and say, "You know, well that's okay, that's okay. I'm here with you." And not anything like, "Well now I know exactly what to do" or.... It was just feeling very, very teary...a sad but not...at all depressed. Just...sort of a healing sad...a...healing tears.

**K:** Yeah. So that's what came in the waiting was...a sense of more there came and in this "relief" the next step seemed to be a sense of sadness. And it's a healing kind of sadness. Almost like mourning something that could have been and wasn't, sort of letting go in a way. But it's a healing...a healing sadness that's present around this whole issue.

**J:** Yes. Part of it is mourning...and part of it is actually...as I sit with this teariness is...a sort of a "thank God I've discovered this!" (*Again feedback to Kevin. I acknowledge that mourning may be a part of it, but it really is "thank God I've discovered this!"*)

**K:** Umm. A gratitude.

**J:** Yes. A gratitude. Exactly. Gratitude. (*More feedback to Kevin. His substituting the synonym gratitude for "thank God" felt just right.*)

**K:** Umm. In the discovery of what is there (*Kevin re-introduces "discovery" which seems a better fit now*).

**J:** Yeah. Just the discovery makes me feel...unbound. As though I'm not...

**K:** You know what's there now.

**J:** Yes. Um hum. Um hum. Actually what you said, I've come...come to. I wasn't there when you said it...the joy of discovery. And it isn't exactly the joy of discovery, but it's very close. It's the gratitude...of...

**K:** Yeah. The word that came for me was "discovery." I didn't have a quality I put on that, just "discovery." (*Kevin clarifies that he had put out just "discovery."*)



**J:** Hmm. I sort of stepped through and got there and I didn't realize you'd said it [discovery] until I'd said it, and then I somehow got back that you had said that...so it's interesting. When you said it, I didn't have it. It lived itself forward inside of myself until I finally became conscious of it.... Hmm.

**Out of the interaction flowed the knowing-**

*(This is where I step out of the model and begin to share with Kevin my discovery of the new piece, the double empathic moment.)* I have to say there's a new piece that's come in the Interactive for me. And it's when we take the empathic moment that I take the empathic moment with myself...almost as if I were another person. And as I check in, something comes there sometimes...and sometimes it's quite definite and sometimes it isn't...but then when you say what it (*Kevin's empathic response that captures his empathic moment with me*) is, I check it against where I am right now...and there's a little more working forward...not just, "Oh yes you got it," or "It's not quite there. Let me give you feedback,"...but there's some living forward, intense living forward that comes in that moment...with the moment if I've been empathic with myself, if I listen to yours...

**K:** At the same time

**J:** If I resonate it. There's some...almost leap forward.

**K:** I don't know if I hear it right. You wait, and as you're waiting for my empathic moment, you get your own.

**J:** Yes!

**K:** That seems to bring, as happened now, more came around the sadness and then together the two empathic moments matching up there's a much more...possibility opened up.

**J:** Um hum. I have been doing it a while. When you were in Florida (*February of 1997*) and listening to me is when it started...when I would stop and do this...when I was Interactively Focusing with you. But then it seemed almost like an accident. Now it seems like a part of. If I take that moment with myself and then listen to yours...there's a little...not little, but there's a...a part that comes...that is quite moving forward, like a leap almost. But it happened again here, and it happened when I did it with Mary. It's a whole new part. It isn't brand new in that I've been doing it, but it's a whole new part in recognizing, aha! this is what happens here...when I'm empathic with myself at the same time you're....

**K:** Yes!

**J:** And you say yours, and I resonate, and I say also what's here for me. There's quite a large step in there.

**K:** I can hear that...and I also want to say I want to be able to hear it more inside of myself...to do that, to actually take an empathic moment on my own when I'm being listened to, to really get that.

**J:** I know that I've stepped outside of the model, but I wanted to tell you what happened just now because we have been so much in step in developing this thing that I wanted you to hear what just happened for me.

**A comment on being listened to in the way I need to be listened to-**

Kevin listened to me about the ancient and heretofore unresolvable trap I was in about *doing* and *work*. He was skillful. He stuck to the ground rules: reflect, wait for the storyteller's resonating and feedback, don't preach, don't analyze, don't prescribe, don't rescue, don't solve, don't fix-it. He listened, and I made a breakthrough...a discovery. He listened, and I got an entirely new knowing...and because this was my own discovery I feel that this revelation is one that will lead to profound healing and change...and further process. I am in process. I am no longer stuck.

**A moment with myself that wasn't empathic-**

During another interaction, I had a wonderful learning. When I took the "empathic moment" with myself, I realized that I wasn't being empathic at all with myself. Instead, I turned a very old and disapproving voice on myself. I could almost hear this go back to how my father might have experienced this event. I was suspicious and unaccepting – in this instance – unaccepting of myself.

The incident occurred on a trip I took with my friend Mary McGuire. We arrived at the retreat center late at night. A key had been left out for us so we could let ourselves in. I was trudging ahead of Mary, each of us like pack animals, burdened down by our bags. As we entered the sitting area between our rooms, I quickly realized that one room had a view...and one room didn't. I deposited my bags in the room with the view. Mary was left to put her bags in the room without the view. She noticed and commented that my room had a view. I thought I was caught so I half-heartedly mumbled an offer to switch. She declined saying it didn't matter to her.

Still, I had surreptitiously insinuated myself into the better room. My selfishness or self-indulgence bothered me. I felt like a snake and a sneak. The next day I found myself wanting to confess my misdeed to her. I let it ride for a while, however, and the bad feeling intensified. On the third day, I knew that I needed to tell her about what I had done. I needed to do it because my selfishness troubled me, and, ingeniously or ingenuously, I'm not sure which, I realized this was an issue with which I could test our friendship. I could take a seemingly not too important event to see if my lack of character

would put her off. Would she be able to accept me as I was...or not? Could she remain my trusted friend and confidant? This sounds a little devious or adolescent of me, but I think that we need to do these things every now and then.

We didn't use the classic form of the Interactive. Nonetheless, after I confessed myself to her, I did ask her to go inside and see how she held me now...now that she knew this unsavory side of me. I didn't ask for the typical empathic moment, but I did ask her to check newly on the status of the relationship...something for which I feel the Interactive Focusing model is especially well suited.

She took some time to answer me. At the same time she was sensing into it and mulling this over, I took a read on myself...how would I feel if someone revealed this behavior against me...to me. This was a theoretical question or a role play but strongly and clearly I was forming a gut response...I would be very careful of this person in the future. I would not be so trusting. I would be cautious and perhaps even suspicious. As this came to me, I became very sad for myself and sorry for my actions. I wasn't someone to be trusted. I felt a wedge driving between Mary and myself. Clearly, I wasn't taking an compassionate, empathic moment here.

I waited for her to utter some words about lack of trust, caution, suspicion. They never came. Instead a broad smile came to her face. She said with a laugh, "This makes you more human. I feel more connected to you." With complete mischief she said, "I might do something like that myself." And then she said, "For me, the important thing is that you sensed what you did and wanted to tell me. It wasn't something you felt entitled to. It wasn't some action you were blind to. It troubled you, and you needed to tell me. And that lets me trust you."

When I held her response up to my own, I was immediately able to feel the healthiness and healing in her words and her energy. I was able to feel inside myself the childishness and self-wounding my own response had brought and with which I tormented myself. Mary's response acted as a model for me, how to respond in a mature and healing way. I started to free myself of my habitual thin-skinned reaction, my over-sensitivity to anything I considered "against myself."

I recognized my failure to develop a certain kind of empathy and compassion which was barely disguised by my clinging to some moral sham around truth and trust. It was a failure that not only was turned against myself, but was consistent with the way I viewed others in similar situations. Mary's accepting my flawed state and admitting to having similar flaws

herself allowed me to accept myself...and join in her healing laughter. I thought none the less of her, so why should I vilify and crucify myself?

What I want to point out with this story is the way other people can be much more compassionate and empathic toward us than we might be toward ourselves. Putting Mary's healthy, compassionate, empathic response against my habitual, unhealthy, defensive and paranoid response helped me with a primary developmental task on the road to self-empathy. Her empathic and compassionate hearing of me opened me up to being empathic and compassionate toward myself. Though this didn't come out in an empathic moment *per se*, the resonating and matching does serve to illustrate how this can be used in the *double empathic moment*.

### Going forward-

I think that it is not by accident that the Interactive Focusing model keeps building itself. From this practice that leads us back to the wellspring of human social and spiritual development is developing a richer, fuller though seemingly no more difficult model. As paradoxical as this seems, our experience is our guide. For me, there is a distinct joy in experiential discovery. It seems almost irrefutable because it comes so solidly felt in our body-wisdom...our bodysense, so centered. When a revelation arrives in this way, there is a sense of deep knowing and trusting in its truth. So I go forward...practicing the Interactive and learning from the practice.

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