



**PATRICK TOMLINSON ASSOCIATES**

**IS EMPATHY ALWAYS A GOOD THING?  
PATRICK TOMLINSON (2016)**

**Patrick Tomlinson Brief Bio:** The primary goal of Patrick's work is the development of people and organizations. Throughout his career, he has identified development to be the driving force related to positive outcomes - for everyone, service users, professionals, and organizations.

His experience spans from 1985 in the field of trauma and attachment informed services. He began as a residential care worker and has since been a team leader, senior manager, Director, CEO, consultant, and mentor. He is the author/co-author/editor of numerous papers and books. He is a qualified clinician, strategic leader, and manager. Working in many countries, he has helped develop therapeutic models that have gained national and international recognition.

In 2008 he created Patrick Tomlinson Associates to provide services focused on development for people and organizations. The following services are provided,

- ✓ Therapeutic Model Development
- ✓ Developmental Mentoring, Consultancy and Clinical Supervision
- ✓ Personal and Professional Development Assessment for Staff Selection and Development

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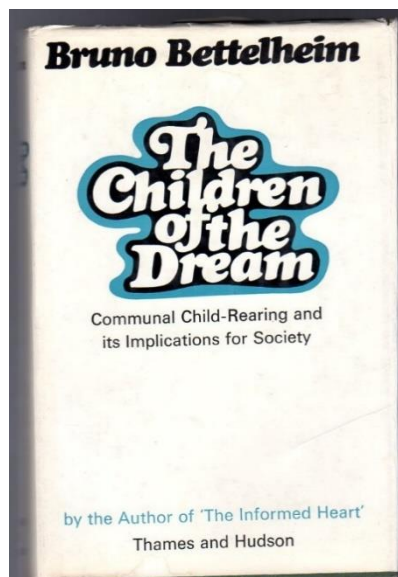
## **IS EMPATHY ALWAYS A GOOD THING? PATRICK TOMLINSON (2016)**

In thinking about the four previous blogs on empathy, it seemed to me that there is an important question that I haven't discussed. This is whether empathy is always useful and when might it not be? Ariel has also discussed this in the previous blog.

Empathy has had such positive press in recent times, that it may even seem foolish to question its value. However, some do, and a balanced perspective is helpful. Paul Bloom, psychologist and Yale Professor is one such person. He claims that empathy can blind people to the long-term implications of their actions. His book on the subject is titled, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. As I have discussed, I was introduced to the concept of empathy by the child psychotherapist Barbara Dockar-Drysdale. She included a question on empathy in a needs assessment for children whose development had been disrupted by neglect and trauma.

She referred (1970, p.98) to empathy as, "a capacity to imagine what it must be like to be in someone else's shoes, while remaining in one's own". The 'remaining in one's own' is a vital part of the definition. This means that there is a sense of separation. The person empathising recognizes that the other person's experience and feelings are not the same as one's own. Identifying with the other does not mean taking on his feelings as if they are one's own. This requires a level of maturity and personal integration. However, identification can be a precursor to empathy. I can remember being with a group of toddlers, one starts crying and within a few seconds they are all crying! Neuroscience tells us that this is mirror neurons, responding in kind to what is perceived. This is not the same as empathy as one has taken on the feeling of the other, rather than remaining in 'one's own' shoes. It is, however, on the developmental pathway towards empathy.

The same can happen with older children, who are emotionally unintegrated, due to developmental trauma. One becomes angry and quickly there can be a group feeling of anger. So, the capacity to empathize rather than merge is a developmental achievement. But as Ariel Nathanson, has shown in his blog in this series (*Is Empathy on the Decline?*), the capacity may be there, but it might not be helpful to show it. For example, if it goes against a group norm. Within different cultures, different qualities might be more supportive of development and progress. Showing empathy may be more or less valued and useful in different cultures.



Bruno Bettelheim (1970) wrote about this in his book 'Children of the Dream'. He compared children brought up in the communal environment of Israeli Kibbutz and those brought up in small nuclear families of the USA. He found that empathy was more predominant in the individualistic USA family rather than group Kibbutz culture. Initially, he found it disturbing to observe children in a Kibbutz. For example, on the way to lunch, a two-year-old fell over, hurt his knee and started crying. To Bettelheim's surprise, the adult in charge very briefly picked the child up and then put him down and continued to lunch with the others. But also, to his surprise, what followed was that the child appeared to recover quickly and join the others for lunch. Bettelheim said that he didn't feel that the adult had been insensitive,

She was merely convinced that the baby had to learn to get along in his group, and not rely on the intercession of someone outside of it; that her comforting would only retard a piece of learning that was more important than temporary discomfort. (p.106)

Being part of the group was more highly valued in the Kibbutz system than, rather than paying attention to the individual. This does not mean that empathy does not exist, but the emphasis is in a different direction. It is a matter of degrees. Attention in one direction inevitably influences what else can be attended to. Edwin H. Friedman (1999) argues this, in his book, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, that empathy does not encourage responsibility and that there is a pay-off between the two.

What increases self-differentiation and emotional maturity, is not empathy, but challenge. A focus on empathy is an adaptation towards weakness. Focusing on responsibility is emphasizing strength. (in Cox, 2006, p.10)

In the Kibbutz example, it can also be argued that the child is expected to be responsible towards the group and to manage himself accordingly. Friedman argues that this is critical in healthy families, organizations, and societies. The individual adapts to the group expectation more than the group adapts to him. Again, that doesn't mean that individual needs are not recognized or met, but the group must maintain itself and have clear expectations.

EDWIN H.  
FRIEDMAN

Author of *Generation to Generation* and *Friedman's Fables*

Leadership  
in the Age of the  
Quick Fix

A  
FAILURE  
OF  
NERVE

Friedman claimed that the emphasis on the individual and empathy has contributed to a society regression. It is difficult for parents and leaders to 'hold one's nerve', in a culture, where the individual demands so much attention. To put expectations on him or her, can feel punitive and harsh! This is also objectively difficult in societies where there is a litigious culture. Where the rights of the individual and employee predominate.

"Ultimately," Friedman states, "societies, families, and organizations can evolve out of a state of regression not because their leaders 'feel' for or 'understand' their followers, but because their leaders are able, by their well-defined presence, to regulate the systemic anxiety in the relationship system they are leading and to inhibit the invasiveness of those factions which would preempt its agenda. After that, they can afford to be empathic."

To put it succinctly as Friedman (1994, p.29) said,

It is totally impossible for either leaders or healers to be a transforming presence in an atmosphere that values empathy over responsibility.

In environments where leadership is so challenged, becoming a victim can be easier than being a leader. It can be argued that the prevalence in some cultures of empathy and victim are both parts of the same thing. The British sociologist Frank Furedi has written much on this subject. His book titles such as *Paranoid parenting*, *Culture of Fear* and *Therapy Culture*, are strong indicators of his views. He has highlighted how societies such as the UK and USA have shifted hugely towards the image of a human, who is weak and vulnerable rather than one who is resilient. As a reflection of cultural change, Furedi (2004) shows how the use of victim-related language in British newspapers has escalated exponentially in the last 50 years. It is not possible to be recognized as a victim unless someone has empathy towards him or her. Therefore, the victim culture depends upon empathy as its partner. Again, it is a matter of degrees. So, in response to the question of this blog, one answer might be that empathy is not a good thing, when a healthy balance is lost. For example, when the movement is too far towards the individual other rather than on self-differentiation.

As well as urging parents, leaders in the workplace and other settings, and presidents to be clear about their expectations, Friedman adds another key factor. This is that parents and leaders, etc. must be clear of what they need for themselves. So, if I am a parent what might I need to keep going on and to be a 'good-enough parent'? If I am a leader what might I need to put in place for myself? Thinking in this way can seem selfish. It is in the sense of putting one's self first, but it is in service of the task. The parent and leader must remain healthy, able to operate most of the time clearly and steadily. Donald Winnicott, the child Psychiatrist, pointed out the most important thing a mother of an infant must do, is to survive and he added 'that is not as easy as it sounds'. Of course, he did not just mean physically survive, but also

psychically. And especially to survive the infant's aggression and hostile 'attacks' on her, without retaliation. The parent must be a healthy individual with her own life and integrity. As he also said, the mother may be everything to the baby, but the baby must not be everything to the mother. From a developmental view, this means being a separate but connected person. Friedman calls it self-differentiation - being clear about one's goals, principles, expectations and needs.

He claimed (1999, p.138) that this goes further than survival,

This is not merely a matter of putting one's own oxygen mask on first. It has to do with leaders, (or parents or healers) putting their primary emphasis on their own continual growth and maturity.....the focus on empathy, because it encourages primary emphasis on others, subverts the nature of that self-differentiating process.

He also argued (1999, p.143) that trying to be empathic can undermine this,

Once parents are reoriented towards their own welfare, their stamina begins to increase in the most natural way. And it is no different with teachers, therapists, professional people and CEOs.

Self-differentiation in others is not likely to develop unless there is a focus on one's self-differentiation. Friedman believed that the number one issue in leadership 'today' is a failure of nerve to define oneself more clearly. The leader's self-differentiation and not empathy, encourage self-differentiation and development in others. Such a leader can be present amid emotional turmoil, actively relating to key people while calmly maintaining a sense of her direction. With this capacity, he or she can affect the whole system of relationships and reduce the level of anxiety in the organization network. The today that Friedman was talking about was 1996 and it can be argued that the concerning trends he identified have grown further.

In work with traumatized children and young people having a good capacity for empathy is important. Arguably, the same can apply to other contexts, such as the family and the workplace. However, this must be balanced by other qualities. For example, to be self-protective, to have clear and consistent boundaries and to maintain appropriate expectations. It could be argued that it doesn't have to be one without the other. It is possible to be firm, whilst still having empathy. In reality, I think it is not so easy.

At times, a person may consciously draw an empathetic response as a way of avoiding something more difficult, such as taking responsibility. This is one of the tussles that can pull on us when we both empathize with a person's difficulties, but also recognize the need for responsibility. For example, as with an adult sex offender who was also abused as a child.

Recently, I observed a policeman in a street having to deal with a volatile teenage boy probably about 14 years old. There were two teenage boys together and they had been separated. This one was outside on the street with the policeman and the other was inside a building with a

policewoman. The policeman asked the boy outside to stand still and calm down. The boy shouted a stream of abuse at the policeman, accusing him of various things and making demands. The policeman reasoned but to no avail. The boy's behaviour escalated. As the scene was on a busy road there were also risks to safety. After a few minutes, the policeman shouted at the boy to stop it and told him to put his hands out. The policeman made his physical intention clear, without doing anything inappropriate. He handcuffed the boy and sternly told him "enough" and to get in the car. The boy did as he was told, got in the car, sat quietly and began to cry. The person I was with felt empathy towards the boy. She wondered what must have happened to him to end up in such a situation and to be so out of control. Having been on the end of many similar altercations, with an angry and aggressive, emotionally unregulated teenager, I also felt empathy for the policeman. Maybe our feelings were somewhere between empathy, sympathy and identification? When the policeman acted, I don't think he was feeling empathy, but it did calm the boy down. This reminds me of the concept of "tough love". I can think of many examples from my work, where what is being pushed for and needed is containment. The need is to be emotionally and physically safe. I think that what is required at those times, is not necessarily empathy but a clear and firm, non-judgmental approach – to take control. The non-judgmental part helps guard against becoming punitive.

Another challenge with empathy is that it might be felt as intrusive. The nature of empathy is to know what another is feeling. This also feels like knowing what another is thinking. For traumatized people, thoughts and feelings might feel unsafe and even dangerous. Feelings and thoughts are often a link back to the terror of trauma, so they are blocked out. The person may also have strong emotions about their trauma, such as guilt and shame. Empathy may trigger such emotions. It is difficult to have real empathy without exploration. Any kind of exploration might feel threatening. This means there are times when it is necessary to tread very carefully. Maybe the person just wants to be not hurt and to feel safe. Empathy can wait until these basic needs have been achieved. Maybe they just need someone to be beside them as a safe, reliable and compassionate other. During grief, for example, the compassionate presence of another may be what is needed, rather than someone who is feeling the same pain. The feeling of pain through empathy may be most useful when a person has never felt understood in their suffering. For example, when a person has suffered adversity, trauma coupled with a complete lack of empathy from others.

It is often not a question of whether empathy is helpful or not, but what we do with it. We need to distinguish between empathy and identification. Where we are primarily identified with another, we are more likely to act in a way that is to do with our own needs rather than theirs. For example, we might do what we wish someone had done for ourselves. Working out what we should do with our 'empathy' can be a preoccupying task. There are times when this kind of preoccupation is helpful and others where it is not. Times where it is needed and others where it distracts and gets in the way of a more urgent need. One way of working out our approach is to observe what happens after we try something. What are the outcomes? Do we find ourselves offering more and more empathy, but nothing seems to progress? Some researchers such as Barbara Oakley, have studied the troubling relationship between narcissists

and their partners who appear to have an abundance of empathy. The role of empathy can become part of the problem in a pathological co-dependent relationship.

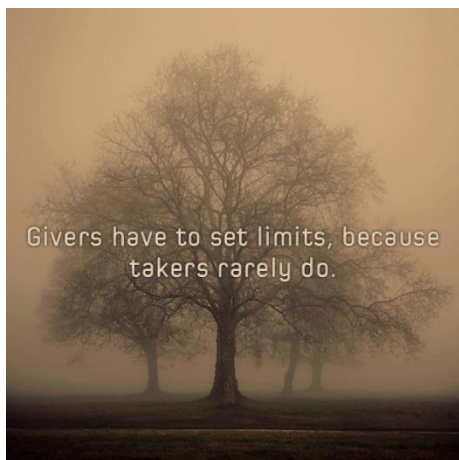
An important question is not just what do we offer, but what is made of our offerings? Some people may be more able to make use of one kind of approach, such as empathy. It may also depend upon timing. Sometimes empathy may be just the right response, at other times guidance or direction may be needed. Like when a leader, needs to grasp hold of a situation and go in a specific direction. The clarity of purpose and decisiveness may contain people's emotions that the leader isn't even thinking of.

The definition of empathy that makes the most sense to me is by Dockar-Drysdale (1970, p.98),

...as being the capacity to imagine what it must feel like to be in someone else's shoes, while remaining in one's own.

The remaining in one's own shoes is the vital part. Without this, there is the risk of unhelpful over-identification. There is also the risk of a loss of boundaries and the two people becoming merged with a loss of personal identity. Dockar-Drysdale's point is like Friedman's when he says that a person must have a well-defined sense of self before empathy can be offered helpfully. Friedman (1999, p.119) clearly explains how too much emphasis on empathy can be unhelpful and even destructive,

But the concept of empathy has wound up encouraging everyone to lose their own boundaries, so it works against the very self-regulation that is necessary for it to be employed objectively. That is how empathy plays into the hands of those who are least willing to take responsibility for their own emotional being or destiny. Put more simply, most therapists are too sensitive to be effective. In therapy, emotional fusion with another is far more destructive than a lack of concern or understanding.



Finally, and relevant to everything I have said so far is the matter of compassion fatigue. This could also be termed empathy fatigue. Someone told me recently that he listened to an interview with the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama was asked how he can bear all the suffering in the world. Apparently, the response was 'in glimpses'. I'm not certain the Dalai Lama said this, but it is an important point. It fits with Friedman's idea of self-differentiation, knowing one's limits and what one needs for oneself. It is relevant to the contexts we are in, as Bettelheim pointed out. It also fits with Winnicott's emphasis on the need for survival.



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