

November 18th – Empathy Circles workshop at Four Freedoms Day

I. Our initial invitation for the workshop:

"Empathy Circles: The Art of Listening and the Power of Being Deeply Heard"

It's sometimes assumed that just because we share a goal, we should already know how to organize ourselves and communicate with one another.

In reality mutual communication is an ongoing practice from which we can all benefit. What might it look like if the way we communicate becomes an expression of the world we want to create, by helping us collaborate with greater ease and joy?

This workshop offers the opportunity to experience the power of empathy while practicing deep listening within meaningful small group conversations. These skills are key for transforming conflicts and supporting group creativity.

II. What we did during the workshop itself:

A. We began with a round of general introductions, followed by a brief overview of "[Why Empathy Circles](#)" as well as the "[how to](#)" of Empathy Circles.

B. Then, we invited participants to experience the Empathy Circle process in small groups of up to 4 or 5 people. For the first round of Empathy Circle, we offered the following question:

"What is some recent positive social change news that you are celebrating, and why is it meaningful for you?"

In the second round, we explored,

"What is most challenging to you, about the political situation that is happening right now? And what gives you hope, in the midst of all the challenges that are taking place?"

C. Afterward, we came back together for a shared debrief.

III. The harvest from the workshop

Everything in this section is from the debrief portion of the workshop, as we do not take notes during the Empathy Circles themselves.

Everything in regular type was taken directly from the chart paper notes. It was then lightly sorted into themes.

Everything in italics, including the subheaders, was added later for clarification.

A. What we experienced in the Empathy Circles

1. Joy

- a. As a speaker, it's joyous to have someone else listening deeply and sharing your personal celebration with you.
- b. It's also joyful as a listener, to be sharing someone else's celebration.

2. Learning

- a. As listeners, we learned from what each speaker shared.
- b. The learning was experienced like a transmission; it got internalized.

3. A different way of showing interest

- a. Reflecting back what is heard is very different from asking questions.
- b. Sometimes we show our interest by asking questions, but this is different.
- c. It takes discipline **not** to ask questions where we could go off on our own track.
- d. We can be reluctant to say we don't understand. This form is more direct – just say "I don't understand."

4. A clarifying process

- a. As speakers, some of us realized that we weren't always communicating so clearly.
- b. When we heard ourselves reflected back, we saw how we could hone our thoughts more clearly, to drill down to what we wanted to say.
- c. Clarity came in the interaction between the speaker and the listener.
- d. This process of listening and reflecting back helps both people to get clear.

5. Going deeper, creativity, and collaboration

- a. We are helping each other to go deeper so it's a creative thing.

- b. On our own we don't know the whole story.
- c. When one person is speaking and another person is doing active listening, we are working together to create understanding.
- d. "We-flection" is a term coined by Jim Rough where two brains are focused on one person's expression.
- e. This kind of connected awareness is like proprioception.

6. Context

- a. We are practicing this in a space where we all share similar political views, so it feels reasonably comfortable to be doing this here.
- b. Some of us felt comfortable here, even though we were the only one in the workshop representing our own gender.

B. Potential applications to our lives and to our work

1. Conversations across divides

- a) Story was shared about a family relationship where an impasse on political issues had felt very stuck. Then two people decided to simply share their respective stories of how each came to their beliefs, without the intention to resolve anything. This was agreed upon beforehand, and it made a huge difference.
- b) Along these lines, David Campt (www.whiteallytoolkit.com) describes "success" in a conversation across divides, as when each person has had the chance to be heard, and at the end of the conversation, is still willing to engage in another one at some point.

2. Meetings – either preparing for them, or during

- a) Some of us can imagine using the empathy circles format with someone, as a way of preparing for an upcoming meeting. This would help us get clear about our own thinking.
- b) Using empathy circles within a meeting, could create a ground level of trust at the beginning of the meeting, by allowing us to experience one another on a human level.
- c) Part of the value of this work, is that it slows everything down with regard to our communication.

d) In some forms of group facilitation, the role of the facilitator is that of a listener, to help make sure that each person is heard. We can also learn to take turns being in this role.

e) Example of geese flying; everyone takes turns at the head of the v-formation, as it can be exhausting to be the one who is always in that role.

IV. What We Heard Afterward, from the Written Feedback Forms

What worked well:

Everything went well, thoughtfully flowing from one point or issue to another / The small group made it easier to feel participation / Small group size / Intro – live practice – debrief is a great model / Doing the actual practice and reviewing what we'd done / Very well-conducted.

Take-aways:

A desire to put what I learned and experienced into my own habits / A clearer understanding of effective tactics and understanding why they work / Perhaps I should write to someone offering to listen to his reasons for defending Trump, and working to understand his response / The desire to work more in this kind of practice and implement it

Wanted differently:

Nothing I can think of / If there was more time it would be nice to practice, as related to our reasons for attending / only a little more intro of the leaders

Anything else:

Keep up your good work / I will be looking into this further / Thanks! 2 hours is the perfect length for this intro / I found this very valuable / Thank you!

V. What we wrote to participants afterward, that we sent along with the harvest:

Thank you to everyone for your engaged and thoughtful participation!

As mentioned earlier, we see Empathy Circles as a great way to learn the listening skills, that are crucial to the work of transforming conflict -- whether to "bridge across divides", AND / OR, to build stronger coalitions among progressives.

Also, like yoga or running or eating healthy, Empathy Circles are an on-going practice, not a one-time event. And so we encourage you to keep going!

For more resources on Empathy Circles,

you can visit <http://diapraxi.com/home/resources-on-empathy-circles->

more info on our work at www.diapraxi.com

and www.livingthechangeberkshires.com