

# Interpathy Re-envisioned: Reflecting on Observed Practice of Mutuality by Counselors who Muddle along Cultural Boundaries or are Thrown into a Wholly Strange Location

David Augsburg

## Summary

*Interpathy is intentional cognitive and affective envisioning of the thoughts and imagining the feelings of a truly separate other. As diversity increases and multiculturalism becomes our daily challenge, interpathy becomes more and more necessary for human sustainability and more difficult to achieve.*

The human capacity for empathy might well have increased in the information age and the communications webcasting explosion of the last 30 years—but the evidence suggests that the opposite may be true. We seem to know more *about* each other and yet know each other less. We can note with gratitude, however, that empathy has triumphed in unexpected ways. Before we can revisit and re-examine the practice of *inter-cultural-empathy*—that I have condensed to a single word, *interpathy*—it will be important to first take a sharp look at how the social locations in which we stand have changed since I first devised the term *interpathy*.

## A RADICALLY-CHANGED LANDSCAPE

In these past three decades, two thirds of the world's countries were touched by major "humans-calling-to-the-humanity-in-others" nonviolent revolutions—in the Philippines, South Korea, South Africa, Israel, Burma, New

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Caledonia, New Zealand. In 1989 alone, thirteen nations—1,695,100,000 people or 32 percent of humanity—experienced nonviolent revolutions: including Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Yugoslavia, Mongolia, the Soviet Union, Brazil, Chile, and China. In every case, except China, these revolutions were largely achieved without overt violence, although they did involve oppression by repressing regimes. In the years since then, we can add Nepal, Palau, Madagascar, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Who can forget the excitement of the collapse of the Berlin Wall? If we include all other people movements that rely on extending empathy toward, and evoking empathy from, the opponent, 65 percent of humankind has been involved.<sup>1</sup> However, the infamous tank confrontation in Tiananmen Square, the ethnic cleansing and mass graves in the former Yugoslavia, the machete-wielding tribal genocide of 800,000 Rwandans, and the garroting of millions in Indonesia all stand in bold contrast to nonviolent revolution.

At the same time, in the West, the 9/11 tragedy led to blind demands for blood vengeance, shock and awe in Baghdad, and drone assassinations on Afghani, Pakistani, and Yemeni family gatherings, wedding feasts, funeral marches, and solitary caravans in anonymous villages. As the West found itself the object of hate, the inability to conceive of why such hate was present was voiced in the United States by our president, vice president, legislators, and thought leaders, *exhibiting an alarming inability to look at ourselves through the eyes of the Other*. Advocating empathy for the Other was seen as mollifying; comprehending an alternate world perspective became appeasing; compassion was regarded as dulcifying—who was listening to the practitioners of empathy? Who risked this practice of creative imagination called “*interpathy*?” The hope that humankind was growing in its practice of inter-, trans-, cross-, and supra-cultural intuition into the Other has waned, and even our best efforts have had limited success. Clearly, *interpathy* is a skill that must be relearned in every generation; it is a practice that must be acquired in actual interface, not virtual encounter; it is a discipline that must be internalized through dialogue and mutual discernment; it has no-known substitutes even with the best genius of online information bits, net-links, or web-nets.

There have been multiple attempts to find language, to advance theory, to offer theology that might provide a means for building human solidarity through increased co-perception, co-intentionality, and collaboration toward a common, peaceable end. The spirit of a stream of counter-cultur-

al leaders—such as the Tolstoy-Gandhi-Day-King-Mandela stream of visionary leaders—nudged us to move beyond the mindset of the preceding military-millennia.

The spirit of compassion for the Other has been kept alive in theology and philosophy by many visionaries: Karl Rahner's essential work on neighbor love;<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel's vision of human preciousness; Emanuel Levinas' understanding of the moral power of the face of the Other; Hans Kung's pointing toward a universal ethic;<sup>3</sup> Thomas Merton's turn from the solitary life to solidarity; Leonard Swidler's, *Dialogue Decalogue*;<sup>4</sup> Miroslav Volf's concept of double vision; Thich Nhat Hanh capturing the imagination for peacemaking; and Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu demonstrating what it means to reconcile the irreconcilable. These are only the most prominent of the many peace-builders/peace-thinkers/peace-prophets in the last 30 years who have lifted a God-breathed whisper of hope into an audible voice. In their life and work, they sought to find words, concepts, and practices that could bridge the stubborn crevasses that separate humans from one another.

All these visionary prophets share the conviction that empathy—the fundamental social skill, the essential “people skill” that moves interacting to relating—is the most basic form of non-defensive action. The empathic response—taught and modeled in the practice of radical attending and listening—hears the feelings behind what is being said and intuits the thoughts that elicited those feelings. A shared common ground is being created where a sort of co-pathy, com-pathy, or *inter-pathy* might begin to link persons and communities in a reciprocal search for understanding and mutuality.

#### *Modernity and Certainty versus Post-modernity and Diversity*

The three decades since the idea of “interpathy transcending differences” was put forward have also been irreversibly altered by a seismic shift in philosophical perspectives as we have moved from the certainty of Modernity to the many cautions offered by Post-modernity. I shall argue that this shift to honestly perceiving one's discreet social location demands an empathic leap, but its rarity and/or absence is alarming. The reluctant recognition of the reductively narrow world of Modernity has slowly broken our confidence in “universals, absolutes, and general propositions” that previously gave plausibility to many assumptions of cultural superiority—or presumptions of our ability to define others by use of our own culture's categories. A new wideness in the empathic response to the Other is required

in the de-construction and re-construction methodologies of Post-modern thought, which in turn make *interpathy* even more essential.

The Modernity we are leaving behind offered a tempting framework because it fulfilled a human longing to identify universals or to achieve certainty through mathematically formulaic models that approached the absolute. In Modernity, theology and philosophy wove a tight fabric from at least six intertwined strands: subjectivity, reason, progress, universality, criticism, and method.<sup>5</sup>

Each of these strands has implications for how we understand the Other and for the necessity of interpathy:

- **Subjectivity** rose from “a turn to the subject,” following “I think, therefore I am.” The self was placed at the center (when self is center and all else is like me, is this ‘narcissopathy’?) and everything else was defined in relation to it, external authority was protested in the Enlightenment shift toward autonomy.
- **Reason** became the final judge of all things in science, philosophy, and religious truth.
- **Progress** offered a self-confident optimism, a belief in progress, and a forward-looking thrust toward an unlimited future.
- **Universality** became ingrained in us, universals like gravity, laws of motion, and properties of light led us to surmise that human nature is common, people are all alike, and religions at the core are basically the same. So Modernity framed all questions in terms independent of context. (This encouraged principles of universal human rights and equality before the law, but it blinded us to much important diversity.)
- **Criticism** left out nothing from scrutiny under the microscope: everything is subject to examination and criticism. “Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit;” so said Immanuel Kant. This self-redeeming corrective principle led us to question all claims.
- **Method** moved from deductive to inductive, seeking the lowest common denominator, moving from complex to the simple, from apparent diversity to underlying unity in a reductive way.

#### RETHINKING THE MODERNIST INFLUENCE ON PSYCHOTHERAPY

All six of these—subjectivity, reason, progress, universality, criticism, and method—became central in the dominant psychotherapeutic theories of the 20th century. Moreover, it was assumed that what was true for Western psychology was self-evidently true for humankind. The six strands combined

to create purposive, instrumental rationalization, and a calculating attitude towards inner, as well as outer, life.

Pastoral psychotherapy followed suit with a strong belief in the superiority of Western thought, institutions, and values—the idolatry of our vision of the universal (absolute, of course) held in rationalized certainty. The formulation of *interpathy* as a radical willingness to be the guest, not the host, to be a tentative visitor in a second culture not its transformer, was a small attempt to move out of Modernity into a more humble and teachable world.

Post-modernity, at the end of the 20th century, turned a self-critical eye toward all of Modernity—even toward the capacity to be self-critical. Rascal's definition will serve us well to apply the five distinct, but related, philosophical themes to the jolt that blew modern psychology out of its safe, still waters:<sup>6</sup>

1. *Disorientation* confronted us with experiences of fragmentation, flux, pluralism, and diversity that all challenged the possibility of meaning-making.
2. *The collapse of meta-narratives* whisked away the protection of umbrellas in life as large scale stories, interpretive frameworks, and historical teleology disappeared. (Moving forward? What does *forward* mean?)
3. *The loss of certainty* resulting from the absence of bedrock foundations for knowledge.
4. *The importance of language* increased once we recognize how our beliefs and experiences are mediated through culture and language—not reason and experience, but language and experience. (The “linguistic turn” is on par with “the turn to the subject.”)
5. *The breakdown of boundaries* occurs as lines dissolve between what was once clear (serious and frivolous, ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, hierarchies of taste, opinion and knowledge, reality and virtual reality, knowledge and artificial intelligence, real and cosmetic, work and leisure, inside and outside, day and night, good and bad, and right and wrong).

However, when one crosses over and comes back, moving from one culture to another and returns home wide-eyed: the disorientation becomes creative confusion, the challenge to familiar meta-narratives is freeing, the absence of certainty turns into a call to authentic faith, language becomes renewed, boundaries melt, and the Other is seen with new clarity. This is what Hans Kung called for in his “Imperatives for Inter-Religious Dialogue in the Post-Modern Period” which ends with “three basic statements.”<sup>7</sup> There is: 1) no human life together without a world ethic for the nations; 2) no peace among the nations without peace among the religions; and 3) no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.

The ideas of straight-white-middle-aged-Western-educated-urban-  
males—regardless of their hemisphere of origin—do not approach univer-  
sality. We stand on tiny bits of ground and are privileged to step over onto  
the turf of the neighbor for a moment; compared to ground that is shared  
in sympathy, the adjoining ground of empathy is not sufficient. Give us a  
word, someone, please—give us a concept for hearing views which differ  
from ours with accuracy and clarity. (The word that’s been used here was  
given to me by Rector of Satya Wacana University in Salatiga, Indonesia,  
Dr. Willie Toisuta: “No, David, not ‘syn-pathy?’ *Synpathy*? A misspelling?  
A mispronunciation? Why not call it ‘Interpathy’?,” he asked.)<sup>8</sup> The explo-  
ration of context has been a necessary prelude to a critical revisiting of our  
practice of *inter-cultural-empathy*, or “*interpathy*,” to name the concept  
more succinctly.

### *Sympathy, Empathy, Interpathy*

The attempt to find a name for the quality of advanced empathy practiced  
by counselors who listen to persons from a sharply different social location  
led me to adopt the concept of ‘interpathy.’ Since its introduction in 1986,  
almost 30 years ago, *interpathy* has been used in clinical training and reflec-  
tion, writing and theoretical formulation, research and theory-building in  
dissertations, and passed into the vocabulary of pastoral theologians who  
teach, counsel, consult, mediate, and work to develop an alternative way  
of describing the cognitive-emotional bridge between culturally differing  
or ideologically-divided persons. Interpathy was an extension of sympathy  
and empathy, generally used to describe experiences of interpersonal know-  
ing and understanding of the other. In summary, the definitions were as  
follows:

- Sympathy is an affective reaction to another’s feelings experienced on the  
basis of perceived similarity or solidarity between the observer and the ob-  
served. In sympathy, the process of “feeling with” the other is focused on  
one’s own self-conscious awareness of having experienced a similar event or  
pain. *My experience is both frame and picture.*
- Empathy is an intentional affective response to the feelings of another based  
on perceived differences between observer and observed. In empathy, a pro-  
cess of “feeling with” the other through careful listening, projective identifi-  
cation and active imagination, one is transposed into a conscious experience  
of the other’s consciousness. *My experience is frame; your pain is the picture.*
- Interpathy is intentional cognitive and affective envisioning of the thoughts  
and imagining the feelings of a truly separate Other as they occur in another  
world of reality—another culture, another worldview, another epistemology.

In interpathy, the process of knowing and “feeling with” requires that one temporarily believes what the Other believes, sees as the Other sees, values what the Other values though these are totally Other concepts. *Your experience becomes both frame and picture.*

Pastoral theologians have critiqued this formulation, some finding it useful in describing the process of moving beyond cultural encapsulation to encounter another in his or her social location; others seeing it as a desirable goal, but unlikely to occur except in the rarest of circumstances; still others perceive interpathy as a warning against culturally-limited uses of empathy, without adequate recognition of contextual and content differences.

*Narcissism: Impediment to Interpathy*

Empathy has been defined as “the reactions of one individual to the observed experiences of another,”<sup>9</sup> and it includes the cognitive ability to understand another’s perspective. Perspective-taking is the ability to put one’s self in someone else’s position well enough to form a picture of someone else’s life. Empathy also includes the capacity to be affected by another person, situation, relationship including concern regarding the positive affect of compassion and sympathy for another’s misfortune. In all definitions of empathy, context received no more than a passing reference and the deep contradictions of basic perceptions present along cultural interface boundaries were given even less consideration.

Interpathy demands more of the participant/observer in order to see clearly what is distinctly different, while at the same time eliciting an invitation to enter into the profoundly private worlds of another culture before attempting to participate intentionally across a boundary. Interpathic boundary-crossing is risky because it creates a new world where little may be shared in common and where the contrast may, at times, challenge basic assumptions about person, situation, interaction, and their respective meanings.

Empathy calls one to be more altruistic rather than egoistic, to extend desirable compassion rather than undesirable flooding. Interpathy, its practitioners discovered, demands all of the above and more. The ego and its defenses must be suspended for the moment to enter as guest into a radically differing situation so that compassion will spring from a level of fellow-feeling—a stance of mutuality that relinquishes all presumptions of, or pretensions to, superiority. This calls for a maturity that allows prizing of the other with an embrace that is wide and deep—one in which the self is no longer center but peripheral to the visual field and the relational matrix. Interpathy

demands a profound reverence for the preciousness and the sanctity of the other, as Buber, Levinas, Heschel teach us.

The culturally mature person guards the integrity of the Other; while the narcissist feeds off other people, who are required to give back the image that the narcissist projects on them. In cross-cultural situations this 'exchange of approval symbiosis' does not function well at all—or dysfunctions markedly when the Other fails to reflect, to admire, to applaud. As a result of this dysfunction, the 'withholding' Other is seen as hostile and the culturally narcissistic beggar, empty-handed, comes to detest, to despise the Other—and, ultimately, to feed off that hate to assure the self of existence.

Interpathy, intentionally focused on the Other, repudiates self-satisfaction games as they arise—as they do in all relationships—and returns to the central concern to be present with the Other. Obviously, motivation in the practice of interpathy requires a willingness to move beyond the encapsulation of the individual in self-absorption, to reduce any tendency toward ego-inflation, to disabuse one of grandiosity in order to make possible a genuine awareness of, or sensitivity to, the other. The immature, narcissistic position with its preference to see the Other only from one's own perspective advances from a solo viewpoint in that it shares no psychic ground with others, engages with others primarily for an ego-centered agenda, remains emotionally absent, and is bent on fulfilling a grandiose false self. Even among those who have made remarkable strides of development in normal interpersonal relationships, this self-serving behavior can continue in intercultural situations.

Nationalism, racism, sexism, and other assumptions of cultural superiority offer unconscious fantasies so that the culturally-encapsulated counselor or caregiver is unaware of living out a circular, circumstantial, fantasy narrative. This viewpoint is not consciously designed to avoid confrontation with reality, but it unwittingly preserves social/political/cultural patterns—sustaining illusions of knowing the unknown—by extending self-knowledge in an amoeba-like absorption of whatever is encountered. A surprising absence of empathy becomes apparent in boundary situations where there is a limited sense of the other's cultural coherence, because the sense of the other's pain is not visible through the viewer's subjective filter.

*Interpathy as Cognitive, Emotive, and Volitional*

*Interpathy*—as a cognitive exercise in analysis and not as a form of *interspection* or *transpection*—is a form of *pathos*: the connection with the Other



through emotive passions, as well as volitional concerns, for his or her welfare. These levels of balanced cognitive and affective human linking may be present in both sympathy and empathy.

Goleman, in his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, summarized the best of our understandings of a three dimensional empathy by suggesting, helpfully, that we view empathy as possessing cognitive, emotive, and compassionate forms.<sup>10</sup> Cognitive empathy seeks to perceive as the other perceives, think as the other thinks, reason as the other reasons, and to enter the rational processes in projective identification. Emotive empathy seeks to feel as the other feels, to respond to a life situation with a range of emotions, and to not just emote, but to experience and identify these emotions with deep understanding. Compassionate empathy seeks to care for the other, to allow the experience of the other's cognitive and emotive states to arouse concern, to evoke caring, to elicit involvement and appropriate responses of action or interaction. All three forms, or levels, of entering another's perceptual and emotional world, require that one extend a degree of openness and hospitality to the Other. To attend deeply—to listen attentively—calms defensiveness and self-assertive strategies, and slows down reactivity so that one can be receptive enough to allow brain physiology and functions to mirror the feelings and perceptions of the other. Mirroring provides attunement to the other at a deeper connection of *co-standing*; beyond mere understanding.

Physiological attunement helps one get on base, to play on the other's playing field, to allow a kind of physiological harmonizing of parallel and disjunctive streams of consciousness. Lovemaking is, at its best, an act of mutual empathy; at its worst, it lacks such emotional mutuality. Lovemaking requires the capacity to sense another's subjective state, of awakening shared desire, of achieving aligned intentions, and pursuing mutual states of flowing, shifting arousal in an empathic synchrony of deep rapport.<sup>11</sup>

Pastoral theology, familiar with the concept of compassion as well as cognitive and affective empathy, points to its essential commitment to the love of neighbor as constituent to all authentic religious response in human communities. The practice of neighborly love, however, has received the most extensive rationalization and devaluation of our ethical imperatives. The counseling encounter, however, remains a setting where neighbor-love is demonstrated as indispensable to all healing, essential to all growth. The inter-cultural situation simply raises further questions about its problems and possibilities.

*Interpathy as Neighbor Love*

Novelist David James Duncan writes of the theological incentive to stretch the soul across boundaries between self and other: "Empathy begins with a fictive act. Christ's words, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,' to cite a famously ignored example, demand an arduous imaginative act. Christ orders anyone who is serious about him to commit this *Neighbor-Me* fiction until Christ's words are turned into reality."<sup>12</sup>

A theology that transcends boundaries begins with the inseparable nature of the love of the good and the love of the Other, the indivisibility of love of God and love of neighbor. Karl Rahner has offered a set of working guidelines for neighbor love that remains unsurpassed in theological writing. He begins with what I call 'Rahner's dictum':

*There is no love of God that is not, in itself, already a love for the neighbor; and love for God only comes to its own identity through its fulfillment in a love for neighbor. Only one who loves his or her neighbor can know who God actually is. And only one who ultimately loves God (whether he or she is reflexively aware of this or not is another matter) can manage unconditionally to abandon himself or herself to another person, and not make that person the means of his or her own self-assertion. Love of neighbor is not only a love that is demanded by the love of God, an achievement flowing from it; it is also in a certain sense its antecedent condition.*<sup>13</sup>

Rahner's work is so elemental to our task, that it is important to summarize his eight basic arguments as follows:

1. The primary criterion to discern whether one loves God is based upon neighbor love.
2. Any claim to love of God that excludes a neighbor, a class of neighbors, is a false claim.
3. God, unwilling that any should perish, lovingly seeks the good of all God's neighbors, and in self-giving, risks all for the welfare of the enemy.
4. Jesus, the primary example of one who fully truly loved his neighbor, shows us what God is like. God is like Jesus (Christology from below) not Jesus is like God (a Christology from above).
5. Christian love of neighbor...receives an altogether new status and an altogether new value when it is lived as a concrete manner of actualizing love for God instead of being understood only as a secondary requirement and obligation imposed on us as a commandment by God.
6. The commandment to love our neighbor, in its oneness with the commandment to love God, is the demolition of our own selfishness—the overthrow of the notion that love of neighbor is basically really only the rational settle-

ment of mutual claims, that it demands only giving and taking to the mutual satisfaction of all parties.

7. In reality, Christian love of neighbor attains its true essence only where no more accounts are kept—where a readiness prevails to love without requital—where, in the love of neighbor as well, the folly of the cross is accepted and welcomed. “In consternation, we must wonder: Have I ever, ever once, loved in such a manner that no echo, no reward, no recognition, no self-attestation or endorsement answered this love? Have I even once in my life loved with the terrible feeling that I was nothing but stupid, simply made a fool of and used?”
8. “Christian faith is of the conviction that only love for God and human beings, which is more than a commandment and obligatory exercise, brings human beings to salvation. It has the conviction that this love is the meaning of the whole of the Law and the Prophets, but that it can occur even in the humble, ordinary everyday—and that it is just here, in the everyday, unobtrusively, that the last renunciation and the last surrender to God can occur that admits us to a participation in the final deed of Jesus on the cross. A love of neighbor as one’s brother and sister, a communion of brothers and sisters having a love for God both as its vehicle and as its consummation, is the highest thing of all. And this highest thing of all is a possibility, an opportunity, offered to every human being.”<sup>14</sup>

Theological reflection on the practice of neighbor love guides our clinical and pedagogical uses of *interpathy*. Theologians such as Rahner, (and we may add, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Buber, Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Emmanuel Levinas, Hans Kung, John Howard Yoder, Miroslav Volf, N. T. Wright, Gene Outka—the list is much, much longer) converge in directing us toward the goal of seeking parity as the working basis for our neighbor-love.

When we, in the resolution of cultural conflict or confusion, fail in our practice of parity and give preference to self or other, we need some context where we can be reflective, accountable, and responsible to the *ideal of non-preferential equal regard for self and other*. Inevitably, humans invest in self-preference to maintain self to sustain strength to care, serve, and support others, and to fulfill our gifts and ambitions as a dedicated steward of resources. However, true humanity, our theology might well remind us, will not compromise the goal of parity and non-preferential love without giving some consideration to an ameliorative strategy, a self-critical review with significant others—peers, colleagues, mutually committed peer-supervisors—in active participation with a visible community of caregivers. Theologically-oriented therapists and pastoral supervisors need not go solo; they

have this potential relationship once called *koinonea*—common life—with trusted others.

So we should end with the warning, “Do not attempt *interpathy* alone.”

#### NOTES

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