

**'If You Talk, You Don't Kill':  
Empathic Imagination in the Classroom and on the World Stage**

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Excerpt from: *Promises, Pedagogy, and Pitfalls: Empathy's Potential for Healing and Harm*

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**Abstract**

We often speak of emotional intelligence, but other kinds of intelligences have academic tracks – complex ideas represented in symbolic form that are presented in textbooks and developed in theoretical models and academic studies. Music, architecture, computer science and rocket science are taught in academic trajectories that enable the best and the brightest to come together and build bridges to faraway places. Empathy, defined as imagining the emotional experience of the other, has typically been associated with social-emotional programs in lower grades, not academia, and is too closely associated with concepts like sympathy, compassion and being a nice person. This chapter will present the idea that empathy should be re-framed as a new, as-yet-undiscovered language for understanding, interpreting and responding appropriately and effectively to the emotional communications of the other. In order to bring out the best in one another and build bridges across sometimes massive human divides, the concept must be redefined as a new form of reading, and be codified and taught as new and complex language for understanding and communication. This chapter will present this idea, describe how it emerged from the personal trajectory of the author, a classically trained psychoanalyst, and it will describe Emotional Imprint, a highly effective four-year pilot program in New York City. The chapter will discuss implications for the next generation's ability to address interpersonal, political and other intergroup conflict, and the problem of war.

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In this chapter I will talk about Emotional Imprint, my organization's theoretical model and pilot program for teaching emotional literacy.

If you're like other people I encounter when I say this, you might be thinking, 'My school has an excellent social-emotional program'. Or you might be thinking about the extensive literature on empathy and teaching empathy.

I will argue that the model I'm about to present is not just a variation on a theme. I sincerely and powerfully believe that Emotional Imprint represents a true paradigm shift, one that is capable of opening doors that other perspectives cannot.

Most existing programs emphasize values like compassion, sensitivity and kindness. They invite students to think about how people might feel if they come from a different perspective. They teach self-regulation skills. Anti-bullying programs exist in many schools. Those programs are essential, they're wonderful, and they're spreading.

But, can you really teach values? What about when values, compassion and mindfulness aren't enough? What if we're presented with differences that seem frightening, dangerous, nonsensical, or that impact us in significant ways? Daniel Goleman suggests that there are three different kinds of empathy: emotional, compassionate and cognitive. The latter has the potential to create better psychopaths.

It's hard to deepen these kinds of explorations in an academic setting. Many people think they feel empathy when they think, 'He had such a bad childhood; I can understand how he became such a loser, the poor guy'. That's not empathy. Neither is over-identifying, as in, 'I get why supporters of ISIS believe what they believe; people in that part of the world have a good reason to hate America'. Those perspectives are simplistic, partially true and partially false, and ultimately not very useful. Is it possible to go deeper than that in an academic setting?

I'm going to try to convince you that yes, it is.

In order to go to the depth that we need to, the word empathy needs to be redefined, or a new word needs to emerge. I'm going to define it as a new form of reading – a language that has yet to be uncovered, codified, developed and taught. Picture it as literacy; learning to read, imagine and respond appropriately and effectively to the complex lived experience of others. Emotional reactions are used in that reading process, but it's not about feeling what the other person feels. Honestly, we can't really do that. As a psychoanalyst, I can barely scratch the surface when I'm seeing patients four times a week and they're sharing their innermost thoughts with me. I can put myself on the moon more easily than I can put myself in a random person's shoes.

I can put myself on the moon because we have a K-12-PhD academic track that begins with  $1+1=2$  and leads to algebra, calculus, physics and a field called Rocket Science. We don't have an analogous field called Human Understanding. How many times have you heard the phrase,

'It's not rocket science'. Yes, it is. Exploring the depths of human nature, and harnessing those forces effectively, is as complicated, as difficult, as essential and as possible, as rocket science.

Redefined as a new form of literacy, Human Understanding can be taught in a course of study analogous to tracks that teach students how to read the languages of music, math, computers... bridge-building as architecture.

I spent 40 years negotiating the medical, neuroscience, psychoanalytic, cognitive-behavioural and educational arenas, and I am convinced that the information is all out there. It just needs to be pulled together and structured in a new way. By using tools like thought experiments, a curriculum can be designed and taught to young people. This can and must be done before they develop entrenched personalities, ideologies and lifestyles that reinforce cognitive and defensive armour. Our children can and will accomplish it, but we must envision it and carve out a path for them.

Here's the short version of how I arrived here.

A couple of decades ago, when listservs were first emerging as a form of communication, I joined the American Psychoanalytic Association list. I happened to arrive at the time of a political firestorm related to conflicts within the analytic community and issues related to antisemitism. I was astounded to see how people whose career was about empathy were judgemental and mean to one another.

What began as innocent comments got me drawn into an intense virtual reality. I managed to find my voice and survived attacks from all sides, and as a result, I was invited to moderate a new listserv set up by another group. I put people in a cyber-room together and invited them to discuss the topic of psychoanalysis and society. Once again, regressions were powerful and dramatic.

I started to imagine the computer as the new generation of blank screen. Freud put individual people on his couch and, when they could no longer read each other's faces, sexual feelings and fantasies rose to the surface. I put groups of people in a similar faceless medium, and what emerged was aggression.

I associated to the world stage, where dehumanized people sharing odd-sounding and disturbing ideas quickly become targets of fear and pre-judgment. Flame wars had many analogies to real ones.

Listserv communications have improved over time, but our ability to respond to self-other differences has not. One need only listen to the US Congress and turn on our liberal and conservative news channels to hear those kinds of attack/defend responses validated and reinforced in the media. Theories about group and social forces and cognitive styles abounded, but they didn't seem as useful as they could be. Personal events happened at the same time that reinforced my belief that change was possible, and that I had it in me to do it.

What to do now? How can an imaginary program be designed and implemented in the real world, and how can a private practitioner with no connections in the academic world make it happen?

I talked to friends. The people who got it really got it, and some joined in to help me breathe life into my model. I established a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the creation of a language and methodology for bridging divides.

One of my board members introduced me to the director of a Harlem based youth enrichment program that combines academic tutoring with sports instruction and college preparation. In 2012 they invited us to design a week-long summer program for their middle school students.

We began by explaining the name of our program, Emotional Imprint. When we hold up our hands, from a distance they all look alike – different colors and sizes, but otherwise impossible to distinguish. But when we look more closely, we discover that each fingerprint is so different that each of us can be uniquely identified by them. Left and right hands working well together, with one side dominant and leading at any particular time, allows us to do marvellous things. That's how our society should work, and can work.

For one week, we turned the classroom into a microcosm of adult society. We assigned students future selves, with careers, incomes and tax brackets. Sixty students discussed their feelings about their jobs and salaries in relation to their classmates, and they noted how their self-esteem seemed to depend on that. They calculated their taxes, learned how the government uses those taxes, and explored the perspectives of our political parties and candidates. Anticipating the upcoming presidential election, they watched video clips and discussed the importance of listening for context – e.g., when the conservative candidate said, 'I like to fire people'.

The students loved it, the staff loved it, and we were invited back to design their academic program for 7th and 8th graders. We designed several new courses that integrated perspective-taking with academics. In one semester-long course we gave the students more complex personas that differed in age, race, gender, family structure, career, salary and political affiliation. Last year I was a 30-year-old single Hispanic female veteran, unable to find a job after returning from Iraq, receiving government benefits. Others were CEOs, bankers and celebrities, but most were working people with wide-ranging careers and incomes. As they learned about our political system, they tried ideas on for size using their personas. Would it be better for the rich person to donate to their program, buy a mall and hire people to build, work in and maintain it, or would it be better to pay higher taxes so their low-income friends could get food stamps? They experienced the extent to which feelings can interfere with understanding facts.

Because it's not necessary to reveal their personal emotions and life experiences or be politically correct, a wider range of understanding about human nature can emerge. We do an exercise called Being Curious, where they're free to share their pop-up assumptions (aka

prejudices and stereotypes) about their characters, and then imagine questions they might ask to test their hypotheses. How often do we tell our children, 'Don't be prejudiced'. It's human nature to pre-judge people who are different from us, so it's important to learn how to acknowledge and question those assumptions without berating ourselves for having them.

Perspective-taking is woven into the academic curriculum in a way that motivates students to learn. Many of the students we work with have problems with math, but they have been very motivated to calculate their taxes and monthly take-home pay, create a budget for their families, imagine what kind of homes they could buy and what their mortgage, school loans, car payments, food and child care budgets might be. The fact that our tax money pays for our teachers and police officers, as well as public assistance, was eye-opening for everyone, including the staff. The message is that we're all different, but we're all interconnected. Students come away from the class with greater empathy for their parents and teachers, democrats and republicans, the rich as well as the poor and middle class. They come away motivated to vote.

After Hurricane Sandy washed away beaches and homes and divided NYC into the half with electricity and half without, we developed a disaster module. Students were assigned different social roles from a homeless person to the president, and they worked together to understand one of several disasters, investigate the financial, social and emotional issues and the conflicts that would arise, and come together to solve the problem as effectively as possible.

We designed a writing class where students wrote from the perspective of one or both sides of an issue. We hosted anti-debates where they presented arguments that respected and integrated the positions of the other side. They interviewed adults about their experiences of being pre-judged and prejudging others. Those exercises came alive when there was an epidemic of black people killed by police, and the Black Lives Matter campaign arose. We spoke about prejudice as an element of human nature – a force that, like gravity, isn't bad, it's just human. But, like gravity, the more we understand it in ourselves as well as others, the better we can harness it effectively.

Two years ago, eight 9th graders who took our middle school program joined our team as interns. They were invited to co-design and teach classes for younger students, and give presentations to parents and peers.

Last year, the interns had the opportunity to interview Dr. Vamik Volkan, a renowned psychoanalyst who spent his career mediating international conflicts and developing theories about the dynamics of war; he has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize five times. They asked him, 'Why do we have war, and what can our generation do about it?' (A short video of the interview can be found on our website.) He explained his metaphor of the tent: We live under group tents, and when our tents are shaken our group identities rise to the surface. He explained the relationship between individual identity and group identity, and the forces that make group dynamics rise to the surface. He spoke about the importance of history and symbols, and his conviction that, 'If you talk, you don't kill'.<sup>1</sup>

The students challenged him with, 'But do you always get resolution if you do that? Don't you think talking would be a bad idea? What happens if you get violent? Won't things be said that can't be taken back?' How do you talk? Students will continue to work with Dr. Volkan to address these questions.

The interns gave a marvellous presentation to a parent-faculty meeting, using his model and making it their own. They talked about their group identity as emerging young adults, and they invited the audience to share aspects of their group identity as parents. The insights and takeaways were impressive. One of the parents said,

Because I was ignored and beaten as a child in my country, I assumed that my kids have it better and they should be grateful and not talk back. I realize now that it's not better or worse, it's just different, and I need to spend more time talking and listening to them. They may have different problems, but they still have problems.

That was met with resounding applause. Defining their different tents has the potential to allow new parent-child insights and conversations to emerge, lessening the more typical, 'You're bad because you don't understand me' responses.

This year we brought our interns together with students from a school for gifted children to interview Lord Alderdice, the psychiatrist and political leader who was a pivotal negotiator in the Belfast Agreement that ended the war in Northern Ireland. He pushed their thinking about the dynamics of war and what their generation can do about it. Interns from both schools will work with us to create a video and new projects.

I tell them repeatedly that my generation has failed at resolving conflict, but given the right tools and the right questions, theirs can succeed. I want young people to feel that they have the capacity to understand human nature in new ways, and harness that power to effect real change in the way their generation listens, relates and responds to the problem of difference.

How do I picture developing this in schools? I can't be too specific because it's been emerging organically, but for the sake of this thought experiment, here's how I imagine a K-12 academic track.

In elementary school, the lesson is this:

A classmate comes up to you in the playground and says, 'Your sand castle is crooked'. Let's list as many reasons as we can think of for why he or she might say that to you, and let's think about how you might respond in each situation.

You might wonder if he was mean because his father was mean to him. Maybe she's competitive with you. The teacher might explain that for some people, crooked things make them anxious. Or maybe your sand castle is crooked, and it's your friend's clumsy way of offering to help.

Now imagine the same question posed as a homework assignment or testquestion for an older child.

Someone walks into your playground and says, 'Your sand castle is crooked'. List 6 different reasons why a person might say that to you, and six different responses based on your hypothesis. Choose one of them and create an in-person or email dialogue designed to test it. What clues might tell you whether your hypothesis is accurate? Try to remain true to yourself and build a bridge to that person. Your dialogue doesn't have to lead to a happy resolution; it just has to be deep, complex and authentic.

Now imagine the same question, posed metaphorically, for university students.

Given that we all have our "castles in the sky" – the conscious and unconscious structures that define us to ourselves – choose a political or religious ideology. Think of a time in history, or in the present day, when one leader's world-view was challenged by another, with the message, 'Your castle in the sky is distorted'. Write a paper on the way that dynamic was or is being addressed in historical context, and how a greater capacity for self-other awareness and an understanding of group identity dynamics might or might not have led to a different outcome.

This kind of question isn't so different from ones that are posed now, but think about how much more complex and accurate responses would be if the students had studied the forces of human nature academically, tested their understanding as deepening thought experiments, and developed laboratories to find ways to harness those forces effectively, for the previous twelve years.

Note that because this program uses thought experiments that are experience-near but not boundary violating, deeper insights into human nature are able to rise to the surface. Personal insight, improved interpersonal relationships, and an opportunity for the most gifted to rise to the surface would be side effects of such a program.

Future generations would be able to recognize and vote for leaders who combine strength, vision and empathic imagination and communication.

When I get on a plane, I trust that the people who designed, built and are flying that plane spent many years studying rocket science. In contrast, when I hear world leaders talk about how and when to drop rockets on other people in faraway places, I hear kids in a playground saying, 'Your sand castle is crooked, you scare me, and you have to die'. That's got to change, and it can change.

Our generations can't solve the problem of war, but I'm convinced that, with a greater understanding of human nature and learning techniques for communicating across divides, our children can make that leap of imagination and implementation. They just need the right

questions, tools that give them a place to begin, and an academic program that values that language, that learning and that discovery.

## Notes

1 *Why Do We Have War & What Can Our Generation Do About It? A Conversation with Dr. Vamik D. Volkan*, dir by Sheryll Franko, NYC:Falling Awake Productions, 2014.

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## **About the Author**

Alice Lombardo Maher is a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst in private practice in New York City. She is the founder and director of Changing Our Consciousness, [www.changingourconsciousness.org](http://www.changingourconsciousness.org), a not-for-profit organization dedicated to dialogue across divides.