

Mirror Neurons and Where All Healing Begins

Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona

As a MD and a Native American medicine man Lewis carries two profound and complementary ways of medicine. Empathy is the root of both. Honoring the native elders that taught him medicine during and after he'd trained as a physician Lewis doesn't hesitate to note where western allopathy is catching up to the old ways.

Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona: Mirror Neurons and Where All Healing Begins

I've thought about radical empathy a lot. When it comes to mirror neurons, the evidence is that we listen with our whole bodies. Every aspect of our being is listening. Neuroscience is catching up with the wisdom of the ages. The discovery of mirror neurons shows us that we acclimate our neocortex as if we were moving like the other person. We monitor the movements the other person is making and simulate what we would be feeling if we were making those movements. We confirm our perceptions verbally but the whole body is involved with perceiving the other.

Truly, we're miming the other person. We're acting with them.

As an MD and a medicine man, I believe that all healing begins with listening. Without listening, we don't know what is the problem is. You listen to understand the experience of another. When we hear a story we imagine ourselves as the main character having the same experience of this person or someone who knows this person. To understand what a person is suffering, we have to *be* him or her as much as we can. We have to simulate being them. That's where I think all healing begins.

Sometimes *that's* all a person needs. Sometimes they just need the recognition of I and other, and that's healing. To listen without judgment or interpretation. Just take in what they're saying without interpreting it into your own theory about what they're saying. To absorb their story as if that's the only world that is. Even if it makes you feel uncomfortable, because it will. The art of radical empathy is to move with the discomfort.

It takes practice, like anything else, to have no judgment, no interpretations. Part of the way to do that is by just being present, being completely absorbed in the other person's plight.

This transcends the "one up-one down" relationship. Radical empathy or deep listening—there is you and I and no one else. What happened before that moment doesn't matter. Whether you're the patient and I'm the doctor is insignificant. I'm absorbed in your *story* and *not* all my other stories of what I'm going to do after work or how much I don't like whatever kind of person you are or any of that. I'm just present with you. Radical empathy is about being focused on your story and taking it all in.

This presence is something you have to cultivate. I think that is called, "dropping ego." Dropping all the stories that make *me* the main character. But keeping the story

that my role as a shaman is to be a good audience—to hold the space that a good audience would.

What I've experienced in the hospital is that when it comes to suffering, most professionals would prefer to distance themselves and pretend that it's being experienced by inferior beings that they could never become because they're superior. When health care practitioners get ill it's such a shocking experience.

Learning radical empathy requires stepping aside from our own fear from things that have happened to us or learning to see our story and say, "Well, I could be *in* that story but I'm not today so I don't need to let my fear interfere with being present for this person who is having this experience today. Why don't I step aside from all the fearful stories of what *might* happen and just be present?"

It takes a little bit of work to get there. It's not something you're born knowing.

Other people are equally deserving of the care you would want for yourself as you are. That is also the realization that I am no more important than anyone else. There is no hierarchy.

Institutions have cultures that mitigate against compassion and empathy. Sometimes the narcissism in a modern hospital manifests as the presumption of the nobility of those who condescend to the care of those who are suffering.

I aspire to a world of equality that's so far from where we are it's not funny. When we sit in a circle with people and hear about their experiences, we learn about how similar we all are. I do groups with psychotics who hear voices. I am struck by how similar we are than different. The differences among us are minor but are magnified tremendously but when we sit in a circle in a room they're really small.