A PORTRAIT OF EMPATHY IN PEACEBUILDING PRACTICE

by

Emma Lee Schmelzer
A Thesis
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to those I interviewed. Thank you for your voices and visions. I loved every moment I spent with you and your words.

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To Dr. Rothbart, Dr. Cobb, and Dr. Allen: thank you for supporting my instincts and shaping my ideas with patience and kindness.

To my Mason, Bennington, and literal families: thank you for believing in me and this long-brewing exploration of empathy.

To anyone else who comes across this thesis: many thanks for reading!

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ABSTRACT

A PORTRAIT OF EMPATHY IN PEACEBUILDING PRACTICE

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Empathy is often invoked in the language of conflict analysis and resolution, but rarely examined fully or exclusively. I seek to add gravity to our field's conceptualization of empathy by asking a group of practitioners how they define and design for empathy in practice. The thesis describes theories of empathy as they stand, the methodology utilized in this study, and the main themes that can be distilled from the data about what empathy is, how it looks in practice, and what peace practitioners might be able to do to encourage it. Those interviewed laid out a multifaceted vision of empathy and placed empathy at the heart of their peacebuilding work. They also shared gorgeous stories of lived and witnessed empathy, which support their insights. Thirteen key aspects of empathy emerged from their reflections, and while it was clear that empathy cannot and should not be manufactured or forced, these interviewees did suggest seven lessons a facilitator can use to design spaces in which empathy may be more likely to emerge between conflict parties.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.

The innocent in gaols
Beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker's father
Stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
Faints at the funeral home.

History says, *Don't hope
On this side of the grave.*
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.

Call miracle self-healing:
The utter, self-revealing
Double-take of feeling.

an excerpt from Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (2017, p. 77)

Conflict analysis and resolution has faced many challenges during its relatively short life as a field. In the beginning, it was necessary to integrate all of the diverse and divergent disciplines that arrived at the table (political science, philosophy, psychology, history, sociology, and the arts, among many others), so our early literature focused on defining terms and building a recognizable whole that was greater than the sum of its parts. Then came the task of absorbing the ebbs and flows of various theories (realism, basic human needs, structural violence, culture, identity, narrative, gender, power) so we could continue to proclaim that conflict is not simply depraved behavior that must be eliminated, but instead a potential source of learning, growth, and transformation.

The field has also attracted its share of naysayers, particularly those who believe that humans will always succumb to the forces of darkness within and without. In response, we tipped our scales of inquiry toward systems and macro-influences, focusing on external action as opposed to internal experience so that we could create an irrefutable body of evidence demonstrating why we do what we do. However, in our efforts to establish legitimacy, we have distanced ourselves from the very moral emotions that make our work possible, chief of which is empathy.

Neuroscientists have traced empathy through our synapses and biologists have posited its evolutionary advantages. Psychologists have subcategorized it deftly and entire nonprofits are devoted to rectifying its paucity in public life. Certain schools of nursing and education have devoted whole training modules to empathy's development, and many theorists have written beautifully about its place in the nexus of human relationships, both broken and vibrant. However, apart from the age-old idea that it

involves attempting to walk in someone else's shoes, we as people devoted to peace and conflict resolution have not sufficiently examined empathy's role in our practice.

While wading into the emotional states of humans in conflict is undeniably messy, it is also crucial to the integrity of our field. Conflict, at its core, is about the grand canyons across which people find themselves, and our most profound theoretical frameworks are only as good as the tangible bridges they help build. As empathy always provides a plank or two, it is imperative that we examine it more closely. And who better to reflect on empathy with open eyes and committed hearts but practitioners in our field? As with most of our murky concepts, conflict resolution and peacebuilding practitioners know about empathy implicitly, but do not often speak about it empirically.

My primary research questions are these: Do peacebuilding practitioners seek to foster empathy among conflict parties? And if so, how? In order to tackle these questions, I have gathered working definitions of empathy from the field, ascertained conflict resolution and peacebuilding practitioners' views on and experiences with empathy, determined if and how these practitioners design for empathy, and captured stories of lived empathy. Rather than attempting to universalize practitioner experience, I have focused on conflict resolution and peacebuilding professionals who are connected to Corrymeela, a Northern Irish peace and reconciliation center. In this study, I have invited interviewees to respond to the following questions: What is empathy? How do you recognize it? Can it be intentionally cultivated, and how? Their insights can be found in the following pages.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Empathy Defined and Differentiated

The word 'empathy' arrived in the English language in the early 1900s, when the German word *einfühlung,* used in aesthetics, was translated into English by returning to the Greek roots 'em' and 'pathos' in order to capture the original essence: feeling into (Edwards, 2013). Soon, the zeitgeist absorbed the idea that "empathy is one of the central forms that shapes what we are as human beings" (Breithaupt & Hamilton, 2019), and the word was embraced by the social disciplines. However, "the taken-for-granted nature of empathy as an essential background condition" for positive human interaction led many to think of it as "hardly more than a kindly and supportive presence" (Sinclair & Monk, 2005, p. 335). Empathy's ubiquitous nature inspired many modifiers (circumstantial, intelligent, situational, realistic, transactional, parallel, reactive, and imaginative, to name a few) and "depending on the definition employed, empathy could simultaneously serve as cause, mediator, and outcome in some models of prosocial behavior" (DeSteno, 2015, p. 80).

These days, empathy has comfortably settled (more or less) into three main realms of thinking, feeling, and action, which are often labeled cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and empathy-altruism, respectively (Batson et al., 1991). Theoretical work has also been done to parse out the differences between empathy, sympathy, and compassion. Many scholars differentiate "empathy, which involves mirroring and identifying another's state, from compassion, which also involves caregiving motivation

to reduce another's suffering" (Simon-Thomas et al., 2012, p. 635). Scholars tend to consider compassion an inherently social undertaking, and some believe that it is a matter of moral urgency for systemic compassion to replace the violence baked into many of our institutions (Rothbart & Allen, 2019).

Sympathy is a bit more complicated to differentiate, because before the word 'empathy' existed, sympathy was often used in its place, as in Adam Smith's examination of sympathy as "fellow-feeling" in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* which was originally published more than 260 years ago (A. Smith & Hanley, 2009). In modern thought, however, sympathy is considered disparate to empathy. In certain contexts, sympathy can be received gladly (in response to the death of a loved one, for example). However, sympathy can also (intentionally or unintentionally) imply a hierarchy between the sympathizer and the object of sympathy, and often results in diminishment or even dismissal of the object of sympathy's concerns and experience. As Brené Brown says, "Empathy fuels connection. Sympathy drives disconnection" (RSA Shorts, 2013).

The Anatomy of Empathy

Neuroscience and biology also have had a significant role to play in our understanding of empathy. One of the most seminal discoveries in recent years is that when a person observes someone take a drink from a cup, some of the same neurons fire within the observer's brain as when they drink from a cup themselves, even if the observer is completely still. These neurons are called mirror neurons (Iacoboni, 2009), and their explosion in popularity has led to invigorated interest in empathy among both scientists and lay people alike.

This discovery has faced its fair share of critique (Borg, 2013), but nevertheless, the investigation has now eclipsed neurons and begun to explore mirroring in entire brain regions. "Because these neural regions are common to first-and third-person experiences of pain," Bruneau et al. write, "they have been hypothesized to serve as a 'function bridge' between the observer and the victim" (2012, p. 718). There have even been links to mirroring within specific body functions, i.e. 'empathic pupillary contagion,' which is the term used describe a phenomenon where upon seeing a sad face, we are likely to automatically match the pupil size of said face (Simon-Thomas et al., 2012).

Such studies seek to illuminate the broader "biology of cultural conflict" (Bruneau et al., 2012, p. 717) by identifying the areas of the brain associated with social-emotional processes, such as empathy and compassion, and then designing increasingly sophisticated measures to pinpoint when, how, and why those areas of the brain are activated. For example, we now know that separate brain regions respond with gusto when people are considering other people's *thoughts* versus when people are considering other people's *feelings*.

We also know that we are better at responding to the suffering of those who are similar to us, like our family members, those who share our racial identity, or even just those who are exhibiting movement patterns that resemble ours (i.e. bouncing to the same rhythm or subtly mimicking physical behavior). The latter is known as synchrony and it has been found to increase our altruistic behavior, no matter what stage of life we happen to be in (DeSteno, 2015). We also tend *not* to respond to the pain of those who are disconnected from our sphere of experience (Bruneau et al., 2012). While these results

seem to imply a stronger attachment and care for our nearest and dearest, some scholars insist that these phenomena stem from an unconscious desire for and expectation of reciprocity instead (DeSteno, 2015).

When it comes to empathy for suffering in particular, researchers have identified yet another brain divide: that between empathic distress and compassion. Both regions are also closely tied to decision making, and have been found to be supple and receptive to training (Klimecki, 2015). Through effectiveness testing, researchers have validated two different training regimens: classic 'suffering in the other person's shoes, as if they were your own' to activate empathic distress, and loving-kindness meditation (modeled on Tibetan-Buddhist practice) to activate compassion (Klimecki, 2015). Some researchers have theorized that the loving-kindness meditation technique works precisely because it lessens the difference and increases the similarity between the meditator and others. "As equanimity emerges, then, practitioners [of loving-kindness meditation] should begin to refrain from making strong evaluative distinctions among friends, strangers and enemies" (DeSteno, 2015, p. 82).

While tapping into empathic distress increases general gloominess and decreases the chance of engaging in altruistic action, focusing on compassion has the opposite effect. And furthermore, "compassion training can reverse the detrimental effects of excessive empathic distress and promote adaptive emotions by actively strengthening neural activity related to reward and social connection" (Klimecki, 2015, p. 471).

Critiques and Potential: Empathy for Peace and Conflict Resolution

Not all scholars are working from the premise that empathy is an inherent force for good. Some examine the horrible actions that humans take as a direct result of the egotism of empathy (Breithaupt & Hamilton, 2019). One contends that empathy can be predatory, allowing the empathizer to take the bits and pieces of peoples' stories for personal gain (Shuman, 2005). An empathizer may not fully acknowledge the differences between themself and the storyteller or may inadvertently force the storyteller into a certain role within the story ('entextualize' them). The responsive listener, in contrast, "not only recognizes (rather than erases) difference but also recognizes how empathetic practices participate in defining (on entextualizing) others" (Shuman, 2011, p. 168).

This also raises the concern that "through the luxury of storytelling, others can indirectly experience [a] person's suffering for their personal or collective enlightenment without enduring those tragedies, or if they have endured tragedies, they are offered transcendence through compassion towards others" (2005, p. 8). The empathizer gains status, information, or emotional comfort from an encounter while the storyteller has gained nothing and is quite possibly left empty. This critique applies primarily to situations that are less dialogic than those described in this thesis (Shuman's work is focused primarily on ethnography rather than peacebuilding) but is still relevant here because it warns us that certain responses to a story may be even more damaging than no response at all.

Another scholar explores the idea that instead of embracing difference through empathy, we often and easily embrace only those aspects of the Other that are similar to

ourselves, creating a loop of self-recognition and congratulation. The cover of *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* holds an evocative image of two figures sitting on a bench facing each other. Their fingers are clasped, knees touching—every indication of intimacy and being 'tuned in' to the other. However, there is one key difference: the figures' heads are replaced with mirrors, and the same face is reflected in both (Oliver, 2001). Here is a visual depiction of the author's assertion that empathy can easily become a process of exchanging similarities rather than grasping anything real about our differences. In other words, I'd be more than happy to empathize with you as long as you are a lot like me.

Oliver suggests an escape hatch from this empathic trap. When we engage with another, "we have an obligation not only to respond, but also to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility of response by others…This is possible only by attending to the ways in which we *do not recognize* others" (Oliver, 2015, p. 486). Additionally, this obligations compels us "to continually and vigilantly reassess and reinterpret our responsibility towards others, even if—perhaps especially if—those others are threatening" (Oliver, 2015, p. 491), as is often the case in conflict situations.

The deepest fear shared by Shuman and Oliver is that empathy can, without attention, pave the way to total, 'compassionate' domination. It is important for our field to heed their warnings that unexamined empathic practice could easily fall into the same power dynamics we might be seeking to understand or even address. Accordingly, empathy should be framed a choice that requires vigilance and attention to our own performance in order to encourage accountability and active engagement.

In a related effort to "expose the limitations and constraints of the current widely accepted empathy metaphor" (2005, p. 335), Sinclair and Monk describe a concern with the disconnection between self and empathy. "Contemporary descriptions of empathy pay no attention to the prospect that while counsellors may share the client's subjective world by tuning into their own feelings that are like the client's feelings, both counsellor and client may be colluding with sociocultural practices that are prejudicial and harmful to both client and counsellor and the community in which they live" (Sinclair & Monk, 2005, p. 337). They go on to suggest that curious attention to the larger context can lead to "connecting and empathizing with clients in a way that is reflexive, respectful and socially just" (2005, p. 339), like acknowledging the damaging cultural narratives about masculinity that may be part of the suffering experienced by a gay man. Through this type of discursive empathy, the counsellor (or facilitator in our context) can account for racism, classism, sexism, and other manifestations of structural constraint and violence, including practitioner omniscience and infallibility itself (Sinclair & Monk, 2005).

Discursive empathy is a close cousin of relational empathy (Broome, 1991), which serves as an excellent umbrella theory for understanding how empathy shows up in conflict resolution practice. Relational empathy posits that empathy is "experienced as moments of connection" and "cultivated through interactions with others, and specifically through the experiences that stretch one to understand another" (Cerasani, 2015, p. 38). In other words, empathy is a "'tensional event' occurring between the communicators" (Broome & Collier, 2012, p. 243). The word 'tensional' is paramount for conflict situations because it implies the experience of empathy is not always positive and can be

a charged interaction in which something new could happen. In other words, "empathy is a complex cognitive-affective experience of joining in understanding, a feeling—resonance that leads to a more differentiated understand of self, other and relationship" (Jordan, 1997, p. 344).

Relational empathy is regularly explicit or implicit in the design of one of our most regularly used practices: dialogue. Empathy is often mentioned in the skillset necessary for thoughtful and useful discourse (Mezirow, 2003), and there is a strong sense among scholars that "empathy can go a long way in improving relationship dynamics" (Fisher-Yoshida, 2014, p. 893). One scholar has illuminated merits of developing empathy through role play (Cerasani, 2015) and another described a particular youth dialogue project by saying, "It is made clear to participants that the goal of dialogue is to increase understanding and empathy: to understand others and to be understood" (Ungerleider, 2012, p. 385). The norms facilitators strive to cultivate through ground rules are often grounded in empathic concern, and even the tasks that seem most analytical and cognitive (i.e. conflict mapping or suggesting solutions to identified problems) require "a sympathetic understanding of the perspectives of conflict stakeholders who approach the conflict from different perspectives" (Rothbart & Allen, 2019, p. 380).

All of these interventions are grounded in the notion that human beings are "formed though their interconnections with other people" (Lomas, 2015, p. 176). This idea has been called many things over the years: the intersubjective self, the transpersonal self, the dialogical self, the permeable self, interbeing, and identity fusion (Lomas, 2015).

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Buber's *I-Thou* versus *I-It* formulation focuses on the change of self that is implicit in our relationship with others (1958) and Gergen postulates the 'saturated' self, in which others come to "occupy position in a multi-voiced self" (Lomas, 2015, p. 177).

The compelling point for conflict resolution is that interconnectedness is not an inherent, stable trait, but rather a practice that can and must be intentionally cultivated (Lomas, 2015). Pursuing interconnections may prove tricky, though, because, as Jordan writes, empathy "relies on an ability to tolerate the tension of opening to another's experience." (1997, p. 344). Thus, empathy can be understood as an act of negative capability, John Keats' poetic term for the capacity to rest "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubt without irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats, 1987).

Scholars of compassion further illuminate this aspect of empathy using two distinct concepts: distress tolerance and non-judgement. Distress tolerance is directed inward and is the ability to balance and abide the diverse emotions that may arise within oneself in the face of suffering (Strauss et al., 2016), which is a skill much needed to combat the empathic distress (also called compassion fatigue) that is often experienced by facilitators and researchers alike (Theidon, 2014), (Helenek & Downs, 2018), and (Gopin, 2020b). Non-judgement, however, is directed toward the Other, and is manifested in the ability to remain open to the Other "even when their condition, or response to it, gives rise to difficult feelings in oneself, such as frustration, anger, fear or disgust" (Strauss et al., 2016, p. 17).

Extraordinary vulnerability is necessary for empathy to reach across such chasms. This kind of empathy is the stuff of social transformation and thus makes it onto the list

of "resources necessary to make revolutions possible: ideas, visions, acquaintances, weapons, social experience, empathy, courage necessary to imagine oneself as a ruler, etc." (Galtung, 1964, p. 98). One example is James Baldwin, who "takes a deep dive into empathy with the enemy other in order to analyze and help raise that psychology to a new direction, to a new set of possibilities, by showing the extraordinary [...] empathic abilities of a great writer to imagine the lives of his tormentors" (Gopin, 2020a). Another example is the relationship that has developed between Jo Berry, the daughter of a British politician, and Pat Magee, the IRA member responsible for the bombing that caused the death of Ms. Berry's father (Cameron, Lynne J., 2011). One scholar described these as acts of 'moral genius' and said, "What astonishes me, as an analyst of conflict, as a theoretician of peacebuilding, as a practitioner in war zones working with people in enemy systems, is that I know just how hard it is for a victim to have any kind of empathy with the people who are hurting them" (Gopin, 2020a).

Despite empathy's clear importance to the practice of peacebuilding, the working knowledge of practitioners has yet to be incorporated into our understanding of empathy for our field. That is where this study comes in.

CHAPTER THREE: STUDY DESIGN

Do peacebuilding practitioners seek to foster empathy among conflict parties? And if so, how? In order to address these questions, I conducted sixteen semi-structured interviews with practitioners, whom I will henceforth refer to as 'interviewees.' For the purposes of my research, I regard a practitioner as anyone who implements interventions, i.e. group or individual processes that are meant to address conflict and further peace. Interventions can take place in many mediums (dialogue circles, artistic expression, mediation, problem-solving workshops, etc.) and are designed to aid specific goals or intentions within the context of the conflict. I identified potential interview candidates who were colleagues during the two years I spent living and working in Northern Ireland, and also accepted several recommendations for additional candidates from those I interviewed. Interviewees were included if they were adults who had practiced peacebuilding or conflict resolution work in Northern Ireland anytime in the last sixty years and were associated in some way with Corrymeela. While this remarkable organization deserves much investigation and celebration in its own right, this thesis will not serve as a case study of Corrymeela. Instead, I have simply capitalized on the fact that Corrymeela has been a lightning rod for many people of deep and varied peacebuilding experience over the years, which makes it a useful place to find interviewees able to speak about empathy based on experience in many contexts.

Corrymeela, which just celebrated its 55th Anniversary, has long been recognized as one of the preeminent institutions working toward peace in Northern Ireland and

beyond. This peace and reconciliation center takes the form of a collection of buildings on a cliff overlooking the stretch of water where the Irish Sea and the North Atlantic meet. It is also an ever-evolving community of people seeking to learn how to live well together. It was founded in 1965 by Ray and Kathleen Davey (though with characteristic humility, Ray once likened his role to that of "the donkey-engine in the early days of railways, to prepare the way for the fuller operations that were to come" (1993)).

Ray served as a YMCA chaplain during World War II and was present during the bombing of Dresden. After such a visceral experience of violence and destruction at the hands of the 'good guys,' he returned to Northern Ireland with the beginnings of a dream. Ray and Kathleen envisioned a place where people could come to talk about and work across religious divides. They found a piece of land and began to build Corrymeela with a group of college students and others of good will. Then the Troubles arrived, and Corrymeela swiftly transformed into place urgently seeking peace in the midst of a fiercely divided society. (The phrase 'the Troubles' refers to the period of violence in Northern Ireland between the 1960s and the 1990s.)

Baptized by crisis intervention and pensive innovation, Corrymeela soon came to embrace the premise that radical hospitality in a stunning natural setting can open up conversations and relationships that would be impossible elsewhere. This theory of change has come under the same scrutiny, internally and externally, as many other interventions focused on building temporary community. How real is a connection outside of the daily strains of conflict? What happens when people go home? Who has access and who doesn't? And what to do about the ever-present specter of ecumenical

discrimination, where peace is only built between the willing and those on the fringe feel even more forsaken?

Striving to "practice the art of hospitality in the places of hostility" (Ó Tuama & Corrymeela Community, 2017, p. xvii), Corrymeela's residential center hosts over 11,000 people per year (*About - Corrymeela*, 2020). Based on their particular goals and guided by Corrymeela staff, each group designs an experience that will further the slow, catalytic, painful, and joyous work of peacebuilding and reconciliation, with a focus on addressing concerns around sectarianism, marginalization, legacies of conflict, and public theology.

The center staff keep the place running and make sure the rooms are clean, the food is cooked, the people arrive and depart when planned, and there are conversations and activities aplenty in between. Community members (some of whom are the self-same original college kids all grown up) have agreed to be dispersed workers of peace wherever they happen to reside, which is mostly Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and England. And finally, there is a team of volunteers who live and work on site full time. Those from elsewhere bring the rest of the world to this tiny part of a tiny island, and eventually are reminded firmly but lovingly that 'Corrymeela begins when you leave.'

According to a former Center Director, "Corrymeela asks three questions: What needs to be reconciled in the twenty-first century? What has religion to offer in a positive way to Northern Ireland, for its people, for society? How can we understand conflict better in order to build positive relations, improve communication, and nurture a society

still limping from a severe disruption colloquially called the Troubles?" (Hutchinson, 2019, p. xvi) I have chosen this center as a prism for my research because it has served as a home base and safe harbor for many practitioners and countless participants, and because I was lucky enough to live and work there for two years.

Everyone interviewed for this study is currently or was at some point associated with Corrymeela as a long-term volunteer, community member, and/or member of the leadership team. Over half have worked on Corrymeela's program team, creating and facilitating a plethora of peacebuilding activities including dialogue, experiential learning, arts-based exercises, and more. Outside of Corrymeela, their careers have ranged far and wide, and in the interest of capturing as much as possible regarding their experience with and understanding of empathy, I did not restrict interviewees to speaking exclusively about work that happened at Corrymeela.

Some of the people I interviewed have an academic background in the field, and most have accrued or even pioneered formal training for particular practices. However, the most common experience in their training background is that they were trained through a model of apprenticeship. That is, these interviewees have learned how to design and implement conflict interventions by jumping in, trying things out, and making mistakes under the gaze of more experienced practitioners. This method, above all else, has created the expertise they showcase today. Some have worked as peace educators at multiple levels, including at universities, high schools, and elementary schools. Some have trained nonprofits and businesses in communication and conflict skills. Others have been mediators, consultants, community workers, and government workers. They have

made films, written books, and developed teaching resources and training manuals related to peacebuilding. Some have empowered local leaders in conflict zones and others local kids with peace project ideas. They have led peacebuilding organizations on several continents and orchestrated creative approaches to community relations issues on several others. They have engaged young people at the fringes of society and built bridges between feuding community organizations. Overall, they represent an excellent array of thoughtful and grounded approaches to conflict resolution practice.

Recruitment of interviewees occurred individually, through email and direct Facebook messages. I sent each potential interviewee an introductory message, and if they agreed to learn more, I answered any questions they had about the process and scheduled the interview. All data were collected and stored according to IRB guidelines which mandate informed consent, confidentiality, and other elements of ethical practice. For example, during the interviews, I collected details which may be recognizable to others in the field. In order to protect confidentiality, I have removed any potentially identifiable information from direct quotations in this thesis (i.e. name, gender, and specifics about the participants' current/historical projects or location of practice).

I conducted each interview individually via either Skype or Zoom. The average interview lasted one hour, with two outliers of 30 minutes and an hour and a half. Each interview was recorded directly onto my computer via Skype's or Zoom's internal recording software. Due to software error, three interviews were only partially recorded, which means that while they were insightful conversations, they yielded limited data.

The data were examined using thematic analysis, with a specific focus on the inductive and descriptive variety (J. A. Smith, 2015). This method entails familiarizing oneself with the data (which I did by transcribing each interview myself), initially coding the data, noticing patterns within the codes, reviewing those patterns to make sure they rise to the level of being true themes (i.e. that they are logical and consistent), and finally defining and naming those themes. Thematic analysis was the best method for this project precisely because of the dearth of current research about peacebuilding practitioners' understandings of empathy. My goal was to unearth a portrait of empathy based on practitioners' descriptions and stories. In other words, this method captures the emergent empathy framework in these interviews, as opposed to sifting through what was said using a pre-existing framework.

That said, I did make a deliberate choice to approach empathy as a thing that can be described in and of itself, rather than an idea that can only be accessed through the way people describe it. Some scholars choose to treat empathy as a discourse, which is an approach is strongly advocated by Sara Cobb (2013). Because empathy is an internal state, she reasons, it is dangerously easy for discussions about it to simply "[pull] us back into the heads of individuals," (Cobb, 2013, p. 254), which makes empathy's true nature opaque and allows it to compound divergent ideas and deeper processes. In asking interviewees about their experiences with empathy, I hoped to illuminate a dynamic process that can be observed through the words people speak to each other and the actions people take during any given interaction. In other words, I am accepting that we

can learn about empathy through the way people recognize it, rather than only the way people talk about recognizing it.

I should also note that I interviewed a small number of people who were selected based on their mutual experience with one organization. While this would be a grave limitation indeed if I were seeking to draw universal conclusions about empathy in practice, that was not my objective. Instead, my goal has been to create a rich picture of empathy as understood and utilized by this particular set of interviewees in the hopes that bits of that picture might be useful in other contexts.

Below, you will find the questions that served as a guide for all of my interviews. Question one was adapted from Raines (2018), and questions three and four were adapted from Bannink (2010).

1) Please describe your work in the peacebuilding and conflict resolution arena.

2) What role does empathy play in your work?

3) Tell me about a time you witnessed empathy in your work.

    a. What was the context?

    b. What were the indications/concrete signs that empathy was occurring?

    c. What about the situation allowed empathy to emerge?

    d. What does this occasion/episode suggest to you about designing for empathy?

4) What is the smallest step you've seen someone take to practice empathy?

5) What is the largest step you've seen someone take to practice empathy?

6) Do you consider empathy a goal in your interventions? Why or why not?

7) How do you define empathy?

8) From whom have you learned the most about empathy?

    a. What did that person teach you?

9) What, in your experience, are the limitations of empathy?

10) Are there any other thoughts you would like to share?

      If I wished to seek clarification about an interviewee's answer, I used one of the following probes: a) Tell me more about x, b) Can you give an example of x? and c) What does x mean to you?

      In designing my interview guide, I hoped to encourage my interviewees to think about empathy from different and new angles. I could have chosen to ask their definition of empathy at the very beginning as a foundation for the reflections to come, and for some participants, this would have been perfectly appropriate. However, I anticipated that some might not be prepared to offer something as concrete as a definition without a warmup. Judging by the long pauses I encountered before some answers, and some interviewees' nervous laughter upon being asked to define empathy, I believe it was wise to wait. In fact, I propose that the opportunity to call to mind vivid examples and examine empathy from multiple angles led to more nuanced and thorough definitions when the question came.

CHAPTER FOUR: WHAT IS EMPATHY?

An Initial Observation: Empathy Is "Difficult to Language"

Empathy's breadth as a term means that it is not always easy to describe. Four interviewees reflected on the difficulty of speaking explicitly about empathy. They talked about its caricatures and misattributions – that it might be seen as "fluffy stuff" or passivity in the face of strife. One spoke of the challenge of talking about "things that you know but don't often put into words." Another referenced the idea of the intangible words often associated with this field (Curle, 1990) and lamented that empathy may be misunderstood or misapplied because of that very intangibility.

When asked to identify the smallest and largest steps they'd seen someone take to practice empathy, several interviewees stated that it would be unfair to judge the difficulty or commitment level of the empathic actions they had witnessed. As one said, "Large, small, these are tricky questions for me because the smallest step could be the biggest step they've ever made." And another, "It might seem like a small step to me but it's quite a big step for them." Sometimes a series of small empathic steps build into something larger. As one interviewee put it, "I'm not sure if it's the smallest step or just the first step because it might actually still be quite a big one."

In describing one example of empathy, an interviewee said, "That seemed like such a fragile and small thing in one way, but a massive shift in another." There was also disagreement among interviewees about whether the big steps or the small steps were most important for conflict resolution work. Said one interviewee, "It doesn't tend to be

the big things. It tends to be the small things." And another, "I mostly see bigger steps in my work. I don't really see small steps." Others acknowledged that while there are certainly important and dramatic examples of reconciliation across intractability, empathy often manifests in a more subtle and pedestrian manner.

Some interviewees thought that a big step usually the moment a summit is reached after arduous and time-consuming climb consisting of small steps. Or that sometimes large steps can't be identified until the full course the relationship is revealed. One interviewee said they were "deliberately stumbling" over the answers to those questions and suggested the following images instead: "it's a series of tiny jumps, and then sometimes this big leap can happen and it's profound." Or sometimes it is "500 mini-steps" or a series of improvised dance steps because empathy often goes "back and forth, back and forth."

One interviewee had strong concerns about the word empathy itself and said that they never use it in reference to their practice. "I'm much more focused on compassion. Tenderness, kindness, gentleness," they said. "Empathy feels more distant. It feels more objective and in the head. Caring but not connected. And too clinical." Several also wondered about whether it is accurate to say that peace practitioners 'design' for empathy and that people can 'practice' it. One said, "I don't talk about practicing empathy. That seems really very contrived to me. Like to practice something, to practice being human, it feels way too cold." And another, "I'm not sure if I can actually design empathy. I think I can design a space where empathy has a chance to bloom."

Interviewees also spoke about the challenge of determining whether one's observations of empathy are accurate and whether "it is [the party's] empathy that's triggered, not your imagining of their empathy." One also acknowledged that "as a practitioner, I can create conditions for empathy and I can think that I am observing it," but ultimately it is "an internal emotion." As you will see in my findings, despite any initial misgivings, my interviewees were ultimately able to provide a rich and clear picture of empathy in their practice.

An Orientation to the Themes

Most interviewees said that empathy plays an important role in their work, calling it 'central,' 'core,' 'crucial,' 'foundational,' and the main reason they entered this field in the first place. One person observed that empathy is not simply "a byproduct" of the usual "language around bringing people together, helping people be heard, seeing across difference, engaging across difference," but rather something critical to investigate and elaborate in and of itself.

In this section, you will find the thirteen most consistent patterns that emerged from interviewees' descriptions of empathy. Each segment is titled with a theme number and summary followed (in parentheses) by the number of people whose statements contributed to the creation of this theme. Throughout the interviews, interviewees told many stories of both lived and witnessed empathy. To begin each theme section, I have included two illustrative stories, labeled with their case number. The italicized text is presented exactly as it was spoken by the interviewees, apart from light editing for length, clarity, and confidentiality of the interviewees as well as the subjects of their stories.

Theme 1: Empathy reshapes your dearest convictions (8)

Case #7

Meeting people who you know have killed a relative. Seeing that in a room. Mediating that. Meeting an IRA man who was so charming and so chilling at the same time and spending the weekend with him and having real issues with what he had done and that he was politically giving his rationale for various violent acts. But he had talked about so much of the rest of his life that I could see more of the person. I don't think he was ever a monster, but he started off as someone two-dimensional that I didn't want to get close to. And in the end I thought, 'You're an extraordinary man who has committed some very violent acts.' And I suppose the question was, if it's politically motivated violence or other, what's the difference? And there's just something about the knowing. The more and more I knew about him, the more three-dimensional he became. So this cardboard cutout became this living, breathing person and that took huge effort for me because I kept wanting the two-dimensional model. Because what the three-dimensional person was doing was changing me. Now, I don't agree with him on why he killed several people (or in his case planted a bomb and blew up several people), but it was a man holding a bomb as opposed to a cardboard cutout. It's 500 mini steps, because at the end of it something had changed. I had changed. I have no idea whether he was changed, because I wasn't trying to change him. But he became something else.

Case #8

I was working with a group of youth leaders and they were doing some training and they were from all over Northern Ireland in different communities. And I invited

them to choose a puppet and introduce their characters. So the young man introduced his

character and said, "Well now, this is William. And he is from Drumcree Orange Lodge.

And he wants to get marching down the Garvaghy Road." And then we came round to the

other character and it was a young lady and she said, "Now, I am from Churchill Park

off the Garvaghy Road and I don't like the Orangemen comin' down the road, I feel quite

hemmed in and quite frightened sometimes." And then I asked, "Does anyone want to say

anything to any of the other puppets?" Quite a few of the other puppets were up. And one

said, "Yes. I want to say something to William. You have no right to walk down my road."

And he said, "Don't tell me I have no right! I have as much right to walk down any road

in Northern Ireland." Now, you might think, 'okay,' but when the people put their puppets

down, the young man said, "Whenever you said I had no right I responded as a human

being told that I had no right to walk down a road. And I responded and then I looked at

the character. I'm from the Ormeau Road and I'm always resisting the Orangemen

walking down the Ormeau Road. I still don't want them walking down the Ormeau Road,

but I have to find another way of speaking to them." Because he immediately had

empathy with this character who was being told he had no right to walk down a road in

Northern Ireland. And he didn't see it until then. His feelings were aroused, he

responded, and then he looked and he saw who's talking. And that made him think again.

As one interviewee said of empathy, "The starting point isn't necessarily somebody else's story. The starting point is with yourself." Many described empathy as inextricably linked to identity formation and self-awareness. For some interviewees, this

is simply a reflection of the way humans interact with the world. As one interviewee put it, "If you're not aware of yourself, I'm not sure what else you're aware of."

For others, acknowledging that empathy includes a strong element of self-reflection is foundational to the way they facilitate group work. One person described how in the process of hearing another's story, "a crucial first step [is] thinking about who am I and in what ways have I been shaped?" Even a brief exploration of identity before encountering another's experience is critical, whether through a children's book, identity chart, life map, or whatever is appropriate for the stage of that particular group's development. It is a way of "centering you to then think about other people's story, other people's situations, other people's experiences." By this logic, humans need to have the significance of their home base acknowledged and validated before they can venture into unfamiliar territory. As another interviewee said, "I don't think [people] can begin to understand the backstories of each other's lives until they feel okay in themselves first."

Therefore, empathy is "both selfless and healthily selfish." This reiteration of one's own point of view is "almost narcissistic, but when we start identifying with the pain of another person because of stuff in our own lives and it brings up stuff for us, I think it can help then connect with the other person's story." Another person elaborated by saying that empathy is "allowing the feelings of another, particularly painful feelings, to touch into my own painful or difficult feelings." It was important to this interviewee to distinguish that, "I'm not feeling their feelings, but I'm letting their feelings get me in touch with my own."

Though empathy may sometimes be rooted in acknowledgement of similar experiences, it can also have a devastating effect on existing relationships. Interviewees spoke about the real possibility that after you're able to empathize with another person's experience and "their hopes become [your] hopes or their hurts become [your] hurts," you cannot comfortably return to your own experience. Simply put, you can never go home. As one interviewee observed, "in the re-imagining of who [the other] person is comes a potential loss of your old certainties." Truly incorporating another person's experience can threaten "your own sense of identity" and the "story which has helped you hold on to who you were." The speaker in Case #7 was certain that they knew the whole story of the killer they were meeting, until suddenly that same killer became an "extraordinary man who has committed some very violent acts," at which point the speaker "was changed."

This story didn't have an epilogue, so we don't know what happened post-epiphany. Sometimes, though, empathy can shake up your perceptions of yourself and make you begin to doubt those who shared your previous experiences. "We can empathize so much with the other side that we have less empathy for our own." That lessening of empathy could trigger fearful responses in those you're beginning to doubt, and "you might become a traitor, heretic, outlier, and scape goat."

One interviewee sees a hopeful way out of this predicament in the idea of bifocal vision or 'having two thinks at the same time,' (Liechty & Clegg, 2001) which can allow you to retain your original perspective and allow someone else's into your head. In Case #8, the youth leader discovered that his own emotional response would be equally valid

coming from his (puppet) political Other's mouth. This didn't lead him to abandon his own views, but it did convince him that he needed to "find another way of speaking with" those who disagree with him about this contested subject.

There was a shared sense among several interviewees that this type of empathic experience can be a tremendous source of learning. Robert Burns wrote, "O wad some Power the giftie gie us / to see oursels as ithers see us" (1786, p. 194)! For Burns and the interviewee who cited him, empathy is "learning about ourselves by walking alongside the other" and being able to "look at yourself and take stock."

Theme 2: Empathy is embodied and embrained (7)

Case #20

Me being counseled last month with Joe, my beautiful, amazing counselor. I was talking about a piece of work that I wasn't sure how I handled it. And you go to counseling for help and for affirmation and guidance. And Joe's body changed as my body changed. And Joe's face changed as my face changed. And it took me a while to notice that, because he was doing it until I saw it, or to see if I saw it, I think. And as my eyes watered, his eyes watered, which is quite rare in counseling because your counselor, or your therapist, doesn't usually, in certain disciplines, display that level of connection. So I felt in the presence of another body. Another person. And I could feel my emotions, not his. I could feel him mirroring my emotions. And my body. And so it's a really fantastic fit and you don't always get a good fit, but part of why it works is because he embodies listening. He physically embodies it. And if I've got my legs crossed, for example, he may say, "If you could just put your feet both on the ground and see what

that's like." And so for an hour and half we are very physically present. And so that's the example that comes to mind of someone listening and their body changing and their face changing and their eyes watering. And what I wasn't experiencing was their feelings, I don't think. But I was feeling more acutely, or in a different way. In an accompanied way, I was feeling myself.

Case #13

In my college class, we just did a midterm and I had them watch three different videos and they had to do some analysis and apply different kinds of conflict or peace type things to these videos. And one of them was watching the AFD, which is the right-wing political party in Germany and what's been going on there, you know the populism and migrant kinds of issues. And one section, maybe 16 seconds of the film, there's a Persian restaurant owner who gets beaten up for being perceived as a migrant. And he's been hospitalized and so they're interviewing him, and he talks about, "They destroyed my restaurant, they beat me up." And he's badly bruised, and he's a gentle man and he said, "But that's not the issue." And he starts to weep, and he says, "My heart is kaput. I'm so hurt." And he weeps. Well, one of the women in my class came up, and after she turned in the midterm, she said, "I was mess with that film. I called my dad last night at two in the morning after I saw the film." (Because I had them watch the film prior to the exam.) And she said, "I called my dad and he was so startled, he said, 'why are you calling me?'" and she said, "I'm just a mess dad, you've gotta watch this film." And she said, "I was just so torn apart by seeing the tenderness of this man and the hurt that was done to him." So that's just a small little thing, but I see it happen a lot with my students.

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Empathy is "in what people say and how they say it, in their body, in their being." You can see it in their emotional responses, their tone of voice, and their body language. In fact, "a test of how genuine and authentic empathy is can be in terms of how it's registering physically." The speaker in Case #20 felt that their therapist's empathy was genuine because he was in synch with their own movements. And the speaker's student in Case #13 was "a mess" when she watched a touching film clip.

As with the therapist in Case #20, empathy is a reflective process for peacebuilding practitioners, one where emotions are "resonating in [their] own body." Of recognizing their own capacity for empathy, one interviewee said, "I don't know really how they feel, but I know how I feel when I'm in their presence." Some interviewees also spoke directly about the neuroscientific aspect of empathy, one that is "a hard-wired reality that allows people to bond up" and is "neurologically generated." One person talked about the power of understanding this aspect of empathy "in your bones as opposed to just in your head." For them, empathy begins with "how you start to interpret how people behave toward you, which part of their brain is being influenced in that behavior."

This bodily connection can be something that both helps and hinders empathy. "Because it is an embodied thing, if we're sick, if we're tired, if we're upset, if we're hungry, all of those things have an impact on empathy." And yet, one interviewee suggested that if we were to intentionally tap into this process, new connections could abound. "If you walk with someone else who's very different from you and literally, with

all your senses, start to notice as much as possible the world as they're noticing the world, then that's the beginning of empathy."

Theme 3: Empathy demands vulnerability (8)

Case #26

We've had a great deal of concern from organizations that are taking part. People maybe were accused of selling their soul or being traitors to their beliefs and their organizations if they talked to other organizations. There's been a lot of difficulty in recruiting it and some organizations decided not to take part and that's okay. They took part maybe in some things. With the organizations there seems to be this hierarchy so obvious there's different levels that they have to go through. So you're someone on the ground that's a member of the organization but that doesn't mean that you can take part in something like this even if you wanted to. So there are instances where the people were really enjoying the program and then couldn't continue because their organization decided to pull out. But in other programs around peace here, there have actually been death threats that people shouldn't take part in peace programs. They're just not ready. So a lot of the work being done has been single identity work. So some of the organizations, they're not ready to do anything past that yet. They're still saying "we need to develop our own organization, we need to understand our own standing." But we have managed to recruit, thankfully. I think we've got nine groups now involved in the project, which is brilliant, and these people are brave. They're brave because they're coming forward and taking part in this. They are upstanders if you like. We have started looking at getting to know the organizations. So maybe two, three people from each

group will come together and we're visiting all the organizations. So we take a bus. We physically go. We spent time at that organization. They show us what they do, so whether that's playing music, whether that's sports, whether that's teaching something about their history. They talk to us and all the other organizations gathered and ask these very honest and open questions. So we have seen an empathy there in terms of, all these organizations have similar problems. They all have issues with very, very hard work. They're all run by volunteers. They all have difficulties recruiting volunteers. They all have to jump through the same hoops for funding. They are recognizing in each other that they're quite similar in a lot of ways, which is really, really helpful. And I suppose that generates a sense of empathy because they understand what they're dealing with. Now they may not totally agree with each other, but they have that sense in your core of understanding more fully what the other is about. So understanding what the organization is doing, and understanding the hardships of that organization, which does lead to a sense of empathy. And I think that if you have that sense of empathy and that sense of greater understanding, it can lead to a greater respect and a greater openness to listen. Through these evenings there's been great work done. You can see that people are learning. You can see that they appreciate the chance to ask the questions. And you can see that actually the organizations that are hosting really appreciate that opportunity to dispel some myths as well.

Case #9

So I'm thinking of a situation where there was a quite tense exchange happening within a mediation around parading. So you had about five or six people in each group,

some more vocal than others and a lot of disagreement and tension in the room.

Frustration with each other and with the situation they found themselves in and high

stakes there. And distrust as well, questioning of the intention of the other. I was there as

mediator along with my co-worker. The moment of empathy was when one of the guys

from the Unionist side started to talk about his own vulnerability within his community

historically and leaned forward and showed the dent in his skull from an axe attack that

he had received from his own side when they felt he had gone too far and he was being

brought back into line. And the atmosphere in the room changed completely because he

was taking the risk of being vulnerable, not being the big man, and naming his own fear.

I think for some folk on the Nationalist side, they both understood that risk themselves, so

they related to their own life, but also it demonstrated a willingness on the part of the guy

who was narrating this story to be real with them and not just to look powerful and

capable, but to be real about the more difficult bits. The temperature changed, the

tension dissipated, and a different kind of tension emerged instead. There was tenderness

now in how these men were talking to each other that felt really precious. I could feel a

different kind of risk. The risk before had been the risk of narrowing and hurting each

other and the thing going wrong. The way they could have hurt each other had now

changed. Because there was now something real happening in their engagement with

each other, there was also something that could be lost. I could feel my own heartbeat

around that. The tone of voice changed, the body language changed and where the

conversation could now go changed from the very tight place it had been. Not that that

meant that they could now sort it all out and it was going to be easy. It just had a

different level that it could now be explored on.

As interactions between people deepen and change, the empathic risk and requisite vulnerability escalate. The speakers in these cases describe situations in which the risks including death, excommunication, losing face, and losing relationships. As one interviewee cheekily put it, "I'm all into empathy, but I don't want to catch anything." These fear-based responses run the risk of jeopardizing the process and only allowing for skin deep connection, as in Case #26, which described stark resistance to a peacebuilding process between cultural organizations.

However, it is exactly that potential to 'catch something' that "can create that door for empathy." As one interviewee put it, "Empathy can be a vulnerable place to be in as well, because to connect with someone in how they're feeling, you have to feel that way too. And sometimes it can be very difficult, because you have to connect a place inside yourself where you felt sad or you felt angry or you felt frustrated." This requires two risks: remembering difficult parts of your own life and acknowledging that you have a similar story. "That's the root of empathy, is that mirroring. It's that imagining yourself through them and that can only happen…when we take the risk of sharing our stories together." The difficult thing about this vulnerability is that while you can hope for it, it is difficult to trust that there will be matched willingness to be vulnerable from others in the room. As one interviewee said, "There's no absolute guarantee that if I am open to someone, that they will be open to me." The real question in any interaction, then, is what are you willing to risk?

Risk is much easier when you feel safe. This is not the safety of being unchallenged, but instead "a place where [you know] it [is] not always comfortable but it [is] safe enough to be vulnerable." In describing the basics of such a space, one interviewee said, "Empathy can only work when we feel safe and we feel we matter…and so I think our task for all of us is making sure that we are safe and that we matter to ourselves and that those around us feel safe and they matter to each other. And if you can get that right, then things can flow." Sometimes this safety can also happen by someone being willing to be the first to become a "wee bit vulnerable" by sharing a story or a statement, as the Unionist did in Case #9. "It takes that courage…to make that connection into someone's empathy."

While some vulnerability is always necessary, interviewees agree that there are some empathic risks that are unacceptable. Empathy can be emotionally, psychologically, or physically dangerous for the empathizer. It can also be voyeuristic ("I won't use people to get somebody to feel something"), manipulative ("I might have the ability to go into that dark with them, but that doesn't mean that I should"), and power-laden ("Don't push someone into a place they don't want to go"). Interviewees agreed that facilitators must safeguard vigilantly against these dangers in order to practice with integrity.

Theme 4: Empathy does not require consensus (6)

Case #22

Part of my work is in working particularly with faith communities, mainly with Christian faith communities, and at areas of significant difference, division, or conflict in the public square, and then attempting to approach these though a theological lens to

engage people of faith. So the project we're just wrapping up is one that's been running

for the last 18 months on helping faith communities, Christians, churches, community

groups talk about the divisions of Brexit. We've had about 4,000 people in the last year,

year and a half, participate in conversations based around the biblical book of Ruth, but

using it as a conversation about borders and belonging. So the biblical text functions as a

way into difficult conversations. And so part of my job is trying to find those different

points of fracture, as we say, and what might we say meaningfully into that from the

perspective of Christian theology. I can use the Brexit one as an example. We heard from

both governments that churches here weren't responding to, weren't lobbying or making

comment to government on the issue. And when we investigated that with clergy, we

found clergy, pastors, priests, ministers, didn't want to engage with their congregations

about it because there's too much difference. And they felt that it would significantly

divide their congregations. So we wanted to find a way into that conversation, into those

divisions and create conversations in ways that would build, not necessarily agreement

over the political issue, but would be an understanding across the points of fracture. So a

remainer in the Brexit vote may never become a leaver, but will understand where that's

coming from and vice versa. And part of the way we did that was to look beyond Brexit to

the kinds of things that we might aspire to together. So what kind of society would we

aspire to on the far side? Can we find common ground on these things? And then how

does that spill back into our divisions on this issue? So it was pretty straightforward work

about helping people understand the plight of the people in the biblical narrative to

create understanding which they could then take out and lift into the Brexit debate

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because some similar issues of borders, crossing borders, and migration and poverty and exclusion. So we found ways of having people understand and empathize with somebody in a third party.

Case #12

An organization I was working with was acting as a host organization for a meeting of different parties involved in the Korean peninsula. So both representatives from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, from the international community, as well as pseudo-representatives from the United States. President Moon and Chairman Kim had met at the DMZ and things were moving in the right direction following that meeting, so there was appetite to conduct these meetings. We were hosting one along with the United Nations to broadly consider different mechanisms for how a continued process could be supported. I think how empathy came to occur was in the people that had gathered listening to one another and those from the North or DPRK telling their story and their interpretation of what was going on on their lands and in their lives. And two aspects of that storytelling stood out. One was them talking about this very long held desire to reunite with the south and that that's sort of the deep cultural roots in the Korean tradition of Korean people being one of the most homogenous peoples in the world with a very unbroken history where they've had very little immigration, for example, so they've had this very strong held idea about the Korean national unity. Speaking about the fracture that it represents to them, given that cultural understanding, to have a division of their peninsula, of their two lands. The other thing they spoke about was a huge feeling of insecurity and how their recent developments and their armament,

particularly their nuclear weapons, represented a shift from that and a sense of safety for

them. And it wasn't that those listening necessarily agreed with that analysis, but they

could hear the underlying sentiments and the underlying feelings of hurt and of

insecurity, and I think that manifested both in how they were listening to what was being

shared as well as how they then responded verbally. Their answers were not in line with

the positions of their respective countries or organizations, which to me suggested that

they had heard these guys at a deeper level and could empathize with those two feelings:

the hurt and the insecurity.

Many of the interviewees stressed that empathy does not imply the need to agree

with, approve of, or like the beliefs or actions of the Other. As the speaker in Case #22

said, the goal of the project was not to build agreement, but to build "an understanding

across the points of fracture" and "understand where [the other political stance] is coming

from." To illustrate this point, one interviewee described an exercise in which someone

attempts not to nod at all during a conversation. The goal is both to monitor when they

may be inadvertently revealing their own opinions and to feel what it's like to be present

without endorsing or arguing. Judgment is generally thought to be negative, but

agreement is also a form of judgment. "Empathy isn't about agreeing with the person, it's

about being present to what's there. It's not about judging them." Another interviewee

talked about using one's own experiences as a gateway to the Other's feelings. "I may not

agree with you, but I understand that feeling in myself." This appears to occur in Case

#12, when the representatives may not have "agreed with [the political Other's] analysis,

but they could hear the underlying sentiments and the underlying feelings of hurt and of insecurity."

In the end, empathy is not about people "giving up their own positions and perspectives but shifting them enough" to consider compromise. Or perhaps even just "that flash of allowing [oneself] for a moment to notice what this must be like for [the other]." Even if this noticing doesn't include condoning that perspective or is followed immediately by arguing against it, it still counts as a step toward empathy.

Theme 5: Empathy is a catalyst and begets itself (7)

Case #6

A man goes upstairs to his neighbor with a hammer with the intention of hitting him with the hammer and the man upstairs is with his young son and there's lots of shouting but there's not physical violence, and after that the two people are on high alert. And myself and my colleague were doing a shuttle mediation, so literally up and down stairs talking to the people about hammers. And we became aware that the downstairs person's radar for noise was just so acute and upstairs he talked loudly. And so when we tried to say, "this is what this sounds like," we started to get somewhere. But the thing that created empathy was that they both liked dogs. And they both had dogs. And we were trying to get them to meet, but they met without us because the dogs met on the grass and there was something about each of them seeing each other's dogs that made them think, 'He's not all bad,' which I think was a huge leap. From 'I'm going to hit you with a hammer' to 'You like dogs, I like dogs.' And the other leap was, 'You have a son, I have a son.' And then, out of that came, 'I have a mental illness,' and I said, "Can we tell the

person upstairs you have a mental illness?" Yeah." And so we go upstairs and he goes,

"I have a mental illness, too."

Case #10

    This was when I was working at Corrymeela through the late '80s and '90s, when

the conflict was still very alive. We would bring two school groups together from both

sides of the community and after having settled them out into the residential experience

and so forth, we would raise this question: What are the questions you've always wanted

to ask the others? And to have permission to ask, given the nature of our fractured

communities, these hard questions, these deep questions of the others. Which could be as

hard as "Do you think it was okay that the IRA killed my father because he was a

policeman?" And this work had the tendency to really open up these young people's

empathy to each other because suddenly there are real live stories in the room out of real

live experiences. Where the judgement of each other has dropped off and it is about the

deep listening to what has occurred in someone's life, then you see the tears appear or

you see the people just looking and saying, "I never understood that. I never saw it like

that before. I never understood it like that before." And that led to a whole set of

possibilities for new relationships and bonds to open up across the room.

    Several interviewees saw empathy as a self-fulfilling loop. A common refrain was

that "empathy [acts] as a catalyst for empathy," and that once one group member choses

to be vulnerable, others follow in suit. As one interviewee described, "[empathy]

happened and then was reciprocated and then more emerged. But it was that first step of

risk I think that made it possible." In Case #6, the happenstance of feuding neighbors

choosing to take their dogs outside at the same time paved the way for deeper and deeper levels of revelatory empathy. They realized they had one similarity (liking dogs) which led to the possibility of sharing more things (like the fact that they were both fathers). Once that basic openness had been established, there was enough trust to withstand the vulnerability of discussing mental illness.

As one interviewee said simply, "Practicing empathy promotes empathy." And empathy is not only cyclical in group processes, but also in life as a whole. Several interviewees believed that it can be hard to recognize empathy "if you haven't felt it for yourself" through others empathizing with you. Another said, "You don't know how to consciously give it back or do it skillfully back without the experience of having it done well to you, for you. And I don't think it's staggered, but constantly recycling upon itself."

Empathy brings the tenor of the conversation to emotional depths that were previously hidden. One interviewee defined empathy as "a capacity to imagine myself within the emotional or affective life of the Other." Another described empathy as exploring "the emotional landscape," and yet another, "feeling alongside someone else." Many interviewees stressed the counterpoint of empathy with pure, logical understanding. "It's not only an intellectual enterprise. It has to be an integrated way of connecting." You need "to understand, to be understood, and then to care about that." Empathy must "touch beyond just the head" and is "that ability to actually feel what they feel, to put yourself in their shoes, to maybe walk around in them for awhile."

Empathy also expands the possible destinations of the conversation, as in Case #10 when empathy "led to a whole set of possibilities for new relationships and bonds to open up across the room." Interviewees described empathy's ability to 'open up possibilities for other things to happen,' 'take you to a different place,' and expand from 'a tight place' to 'a different level' things could 'now be explored on.' In the context of a program's impact, one interviewee talked about wanting to create an experience that would "stir [a person's] soul" rather than leaving them saying, "Och! Well that was interesting. Yeah, what'll we have for dinner?" If you aren't careful, empathy will transport you beyond humdrum concerns into a deeper experience, which is precisely the goal of many peacebuilding endeavors.

Several interviewees also talked about empathy as the springboard for very practical aims. According to this idea, genuine success in conflict resolution processes simply isn't possible without "breaking through to that layer of human emotion and connection. […] [Empathy] is ultimately what allows people to shift their perspectives to a sufficient extent" to make progress. Another interviewee said, "The stronger the empathy, the greater purchase and likelihood of moving forward." And one more, "it's also something that can produce more action and more long-term goals." Empathy is therefore not just an experience in and of itself, but the foundation on which problem solving can flourish.

One interviewee called empathy the "key starting point for a change in relationship and/or creating community between people who might be at odds or who want to stay at surface level." Another said empathy is "not just some magical little

emotional thing that's floating out there, it's that you really can create conditions which are more likely to bring about an empathic moment response. And it's my understanding that that moment often [creates] new possibilities for people to move forward."

Theme 6: Empathy is determined to be curious (5)

Case #17

There's a young woman that I know through our work that had been bullied a lot in online spaces. She was in online gaming communities and she was experiencing bullying. And I don't know how much our tools that took her through the process helped her, but they do ask you to sort of dig deeper at every level, like what's the root of that and what's the root of that and what's the root of that? And she came to the conclusion that the bullies weren't terrible people, but they maybe were experiencing bullying themselves and they weren't always aware of the consequences of their actions, especially since a lot of this was happening online. So because she was able to extend empathy to them, she was able to create a project and not just sit in her own bitterness about it, but approach people who might be in that kind of role of bully with a sense of empathy. To be able to extend friendship to them. She went on to create a project that was an awareness and kindness building campaign, and she's designed these comic books around the impact of bullying.

Case #4

One of the biggest things I've seen was in a Southeast Asian country where we worked in which the government had someone who ended up being a de facto mediator for the first phase of their peace process. He's a former military general, former cabinet

minister in the sort of quasi-military government. So a man that had been involved at the front lines of a long running civil war, and realized that in order for this to move he needed to go and listen to the other side a lot. So he would take it upon himself to drive for days on end into the jungle to the camps of the ethnic armed organizations which are mostly situated in the border areas and just listen to these guys as they were telling him their grievances and their problems with the government. And many a times holding him directly responsible as the government representative for that. So he would sit there and listen and at times apologize for some things but more so than that would just empathize with what he was hearing. And some of his critics would say he did that in an instrumental fashion, to achieve another end and that the government under that presidency was never sincere at all actually in their efforts. Why I think that to be wrong is that despite the lack of progress in some ways in that country when there was a change of government and this guy had to resign, I was lucky enough to be there when all these ethnic organizations threw him his goodbye party. Which is the most remarkable thing I have ever seen. These ethnic groups, they all have these sort of very different, colorful garb and it was five hours of like this huge party, just the best you can think of with karaoke and singing and speeches in this guy's honor from jungle fighters and people that had lost loved ones at the hands of the side that this guy represented with a tremendous respect and reverence they had for how he had come to them and listened to them and understood their concerns and grievances. I have a picture, which I'm not going to share with you because I don't think I'm allowed, of a conga line with like him and this rebel leader in front of him and another rebel leader behind him and like two

hundred people and it's like dah duh dah duh dah dah! It was a night that just went on forever. As far as biggest steps taken, in terms of distance you travel between where you've been at and where you're going mentally as well as physically, this guy drove some pretty shitty roads to get to where he was going.

Several interviewees defined empathy in terms of curiosity, such as "curiosity about someone's story" and "curiosity and care for what [is] going on with the other person, no matter how annoying or hurtful the circumstances." This is what one interviewee calls being "curious in a relational way, as opposed to a judgmental way." In both cases above, someone (whether a teenage girl or a former military general) chooses to stick to their curiosity in spite of some serious hurdles (such as bullying, extreme travel, and blame). One interviewee said that the empathic process requires you to "notice the people around you" and "be curious about who they are and what lies behind."

This can be a gateway to revisiting the narratives a person may have been told over an entire lifetime. "Doubt is a very important step in that journey of understanding and wanting to learn more. One question opens up six more." Eventually a person might have the strength to confront old narratives and say, 'I've met someone who is the Other, and it turns out that they don't have horns.' Curiosity can start with something as simple as examining "our relationship with someone else's relationship with something," especially music, art, or anything for which the subjective experience is paramount. Rather than immediately ridiculing someone's love of something you find ridiculous, one interviewee suggested that "the empathetic response would be, 'tell me what you love so much about this.'" In trying to see the beauty someone else sees in a country song you

find unbearable twangy or a modern art piece that just looks like an old shoe, you are slowly building your empathic prowess.

Theme 7: Empathy is always incomplete (4)

Case #24

Within our community integration program, we've been talking quite a bit about refugees and migrants and talking as well about hate crime. Very many powerful conversations have been had and we're hoping to make some kind of difference with this program. So we've organized a range of workshops, from very simple workshops where people talk about their culture and the international cafe style workshops to workshops around hate crime. One of the ladies that we have met through the workshops is a woman called Margaret. Now she is from Somalia and she was one of our speakers and my goodness, it was really emotional and really moving and you really had to put yourself in her place whenever you were listening to her because the story was so personal. I think sometimes it takes that level of someone actually agreeing to tell their story and actually becoming a wee bit vulnerable. But only when they feel comfortable to be that way, of course. It takes that courage to make a difference in people's feelings and to make that connection into someone's empathy within them. I know that one of the workshops we ran would have been around refugees and migrants and really the stories, not just Margaret, but there was quite a range of table hosts, but the stories really touched the people who were listening to them. So for instance there would have been an introduction where people would get to talk about what refugees are, what migrants are, what the definitions are, what they think, what their assumptions are and all the rest. And then we would have

the workshop where the refugees that were present and migrants that were present were able to talk and tell their story. And actually talk very frankly about, what is life like in Northern Ireland as a refugee? And just the stories of how difficult it is. How you get the small plastic card. It has a certain allowance on it every week and you can only go to certain shops to use it. Just the lack of connection, the lack of family. The insults, the hatred that they have to face was deeply, deeply touching and I think that it had a profound effect. You could see the effect on people's faces as they were listening to the stories.

Case #16

There was this experiential activity that we used to do with these ten-year-olds or so called Tribes. You divide the group of children into different tribes and they have different characteristics, so they read about themselves and they have to act out these characteristics. So one tribe might be like, when you meet somebody new, you don't make eye contact. And the other tribe is like, it's really rude to not make eye contact. So you kind of create the conditions for misunderstanding and then they act it out and then you have to debrief with them. And it was amazing how that experience of putting them very concretely into a situation where both sides would experience offense from the other side and they would hear each other explain that. Maybe it's because they were both experiencing at the same time that when they heard each other explain it there were just these little moments. When they heard the other side explain why they were asking in that way, I think there was just a shift of energy in the room. Because they're kids and so they would be outwardly upset, like "They're so rude!" and then they would be like, "Oh, that's

why you did that!" And it was just a very easy shift for them because they were little and because it was a game. And I think it's because they did actually go through the same experience at the same time, but they realized the different contexts mattered.

One interviewee said, "I think empathy can sometimes be confused with trying to be the same as." However, "I'm a white middle class, middle aged British male. If I was working with a group and I said to them, I know exactly how you feel…it would be met, quite correctly, with scorn and derision and laughter." Instead of striving for perfect empathy, "it's about being authentic as I am with them as they are." In Case #16, children got an experiential taste of striving for this kind of culturally responsive empathy as they attempted to understand the unfamiliar ways of their counterparts.

Another interviewee described Carl Roger's idea of empathetic understanding (Rogers, 2007) as a state of 'as if.' The goal is not to absorb someone else's situation, but to "work as if it was your own." Ultimately, there is still a critical distance between you and the other person. "Other people's experiences are other people's. They're not yours. And so you can only get as close to 'as if.'" Other interviewees described this aspect of empathy in terms of how it feels when one is empathized with. One said, "She sees me, she's with me in it, but it's still my experience." Another, "I could feel my emotions, not his." And a third, "I was feeling more acutely or in a different way. In an accompanied way, I was feeling myself."

Even when empathy is offered, it may not be taken onboard. One interviewee said that we must practice "reaching out in the discomfort, which is, even for the non-religious, an act of faith, because we're not sure what the response to empathy will be." In

Case #24, Margaret knew full well the possible ramifications of sharing her story across the vast gulf of privilege, language, and culture, and yet decided to step forward anyway.

Another interviewee continued this thread by taking the long view. "Let's say I show empathy to someone and they respond in a way that I'm not expecting, or they are aggressive or defensive. Does that mean that my empathy was unsuccessful? That's not to say, though, that that act wasn't then, in the privacy of someone's reflective space, appreciated later on, hours later. They might have found that really profound and really important but just the emotional pain that was being experienced at the time did not allow them the luxury of receiving it well."

Theme 8: Empathy pauses your agenda (2)

Case #23

Quite unexpectedly, a student had a - I'm not a psychologist so I don't know the exact diagnosis - but some kind of psychotic episode or some kind of major breakdown. It was physically quite a shocking experience because the student was in significant distress, was kind of moving a lot, while sitting down, but very upset, and what the student was saying made it clear that we need to figure out how to help and find support right now, which involves getting access to trained professionals, etc. Once that happened, I was conscious about ensuring that that particular student was being looked after, but knew that at that point I had a room full of twelve other students who had just experienced that and what do I do in terms of being fully present to their needs. So the first thing I do, was I basically threw the lesson plan out of the window. I was like, this is just not happening anymore. The needs of the group right now are to explore and talk

through what just happened. We took a break, a 10, 15 minute break, and then we came back and I just tried to open the space whilst being honest and vulnerable and saying, "I don't really know what to do right now but I think it's important we try and talk through what happened." So with hindsight, I think it was a case of tuning into what everybody in the room needed. So rather than saying, 'well, I need to just teach this class right now because that's what the plan was, and that's what I said was going to do and we've got a lot to cover.' I think that empathy manifested itself by just saying 'forget it, I'm going to figuratively rip this up and then just be present.' One of things that it also I think did was to start a conversation within the class, and this was demonstrating empathy towards the student who wasn't there anymore, around how do we tell this story? Because people are going to know about this. It is going to get out that this incident happened in this classroom. How do we tell the story in a way that is respectful and shows dignity to the member of our class who just had that experience? And then also, when hopefully this student returns to the classroom, how do we welcome that student back in a way that doesn't make them feel embarrassed? How can we just be fully present in that situation for that student?

Case #15

I think one of my kind of initial core learnings was about a year and a half ago when, it was a group of kids and we were late, so I was kind of trying to hurry them up through in the forest from somewhere to somewhere and one child had stopped and had knelt down on the ground and was looking into a puddle. And I kind of realized they were lagging behind, so I went back for them and I said, "Come on, we need to hurry, we're

late." And the child just exploded and said, "I need to look inside this puddle. I haven't

finished seeing what's inside it." And it was a really important moment in terms of, whose

agenda is this? And so I stopped with the child and knelt down next to them and looked

inside the puddle with them and we started to chat about what was inside the puddle and

noticing squirmy things and stones and different colors of browns and so on. And then

just by that moment the child started to talk a little bit about their family and what was

happening at home. You know, it's classic stuff. And then I suppose at a certain point in

the conversation the child kind of looked at me and said, "You're worried we're kind of

being left behind by the other group." And I said, "Yeah, we probably need to catch up

now." So it was an interesting moment of connecting to each other. Me having to stop

and be still and stop thinking about what I needed from the situation and then the child

being able to speak a little. And then the child in return being conscious of my needs

eventually in terms of catching up.

Empathy is "a willingness to press pause on the importance of your own story or agenda." One interviewee gave an example of how Corrymeela's founder exhibited this quality by taking time to consult the youngest generation of volunteers about a critical decision. This interviewee saw that as evidence of thinking 'I'm going to press pause on what I'm doing right now to try and figure out what's going on for some else.' We also find an example of this in Case #23, where the speaker chooses to throw their carefully planned class session out of the window in order respond to the needs of their students.

The empathic process requires you to "notice the people around you" and "be curious about who they are and what lies behind." Case #15 demonstrates unexpected and

mutual empathy that would not have been possible if both child and adult weren't willing to put their needs on hold long enough to make room for the other person's. As one interviewee said, empathy is "placing more of an emphasis on where they are than where I am, or where they might want to go or need to go as opposed to where I want to go."

Theme 9: Empathy is a non-judgmental presence (11)

Case #21

> *There was a situation in a training where someone was talking about why they hadn't fulfilled the requirements of the course, saying, my father's dying. And I could see several people wanting to reach over and to produce tissues and I thought the way to be empathic for the whole room is to say, "we're here with you, trying not to solve it." And I could feel myself readjusting my body to be present to the person. But also knowing that the whole room wanting me to take away the discomfort. And so empathy in that situation I think was to be aware of other people's bids for me to get the pain out of the room and my sense as a practitioner was to stay present and to allow that person to be with the pain of their father dying and for me not to rescue her out of that but to be present. To just let her present to the reality of that as opposed to saying, 'you should seek counseling' or 'let's talk about this afterwards' or 'here's all these lovely people who want to hug you now.' Because I said, "let's not try and rescue here. Let's be present to what's in the room. Whatever you're feeling is what you're feeling, but let's be present to what is in the room." And afterwards a couple of people said, "well I don't want to appear like I'm not listening or I'm not caring" which is interesting in this conversation of empathy. I think the assumption of empathy is you bring the tissue out and you give a*

hug and I think that can stop people feeling. And so I hope that I was being empathic to a whole lot of things, but starting with the person. And the person was also trying to say why they hadn't done their assignment, so there's a whole range of things in the room. I haven't done my assignment. My father's dying. This will be the last Christmas. I haven't done my assignment. And so it raises all sorts of issues about empathy because I could also feel my irritation. I could feel myself being irritated at one point and was trying to be present to that as well going, 'hello irritation,' you know.

Case #3

Frank was sitting with someone at the table during supper and the guy across from him just begins to say,"You know, I actually think I'm a woman." Now Frank is heteronormative and this is a stretch for him. But Frank is eating, going 'what?' And the person across the table says, "Yeah, I've always just really felt l was a woman. And I've wanted to transition but my partner doesn't want that, and my kids, it would freak them out." So Frank keeps eating, he's not really sure what he's supposed to be saying, and this person's clearly being vulnerable. And Frank's really uncomfortable because it's public, he doesn't know what to say, and he's embarrassed that he doesn't know what to say. The person across the table is like, "Yeah, so sometimes I wear bras and panties under my clothes and then when no one's at home I put on my lingerie and I put on a negligee and I really just like to wear that stuff." Frank knows that he's uncomfortable. He's reflexive, so he recognizes that he's uncomfortable. And he chose to sit there and try to figure out how to engage this person that was very foreign. What was being said was very foreign, it was confusing, and Frank didn't understand it. And I think by not trying to change the subject,

but recognizing that he was really uncomfortable, unsure of himself, but just saying this

is a really lovely person and a human being and just because I'm uncomfortable, that's

about me, it's not about them. I don't want to embarrass this person because I'm

uncomfortable. So he was doing all this stuff inside of himself and staying in relationship

with the person, you know. And eating his food and acting like everything was okay. I

think to me it's a small step. Nobody in the room would have known it, but for Frank, that

was small thing for him to figure out what to say or how to respond.

It was a nearly universal sentiment among interviewees that empathy becomes evident through a quality of presence. They described how their empathic role models "made you feel like you mattered" and practiced "unconditional acceptance." When someone exudes empathy, "people just sigh with relief and [say], I'm okay. I'm okay in this room." This presence also has to do with generosity and openness, and constantly encouraging others to pursue their ideas and passions. "He was a great one for enabling," one interviewee said of their role model. And this presence is not a cape that you put on from time to time, but something reflexive, an everyday practice. "She can't stop herself imagining herself through the other. That's who she is."

Empathic presence doesn't overwhelm people or consume them but greets them as they are. "She taught me through example what it looks like to meet people and hold people in their pain…She sees me, she's with me in it, but it's still my experience." One interviewee described working on a particularly intense dispute as a relatively new mediator and seeking advice from some veterans in the field. "I wanted them to tell me

what to do. And they just made me soup and were present to me." It was "a profound example of loving non-judgmental presence."

Several people mentioned the often-shared animation (RSA Shorts, 2013) that illustrates a few minutes of the inimitable Brené Brown speaking about the difference between empathy and sympathy. In the cartoon, a fox finds herself in a deep, dark hole. Her friend (an antelope) passes by, sees the fox and proceeds to comment loudly about how awful the hole is and how the fox might get herself out. Meanwhile, another friend (a bear) climbs quietly down into the hole with the fox and sits by her side. One interviewee described this key aspect of empathic practice as "the willingness to be with people in the mess." In Case #3, Frank chooses to sit with discomfort and pain in order to preserve an accepting space for his dinner companion. No matter his inner turmoil, he was practicing, as one interviewee called it, "confidence in silence" and "not rushing to find solutions." That same interviewee referenced some advice they received from a friend about parenting: 'Just sit in the dark with them. Don't rush to find the light.'

Another interviewee defined empathy as "allowing the feeling of another to touch and awaken the feelings they mirror, and to sit with that for the purpose of understanding and connection. Not making it better, making it go away, explaining it, or arguing with it." Another condensed this idea by saying that empathy is any attempt to be "present without judgement." What that presence looks like, however, is not always self-evident, as demonstrated by Case #21. The speaker named that while offering a physical sign of support can be an act of empathy, it can also be more about the needs of the person offering the hug than those of the pained person. As the speaker said, "I think the

assumption of empathy is you bring the tissue out and you give a hug. And I think that can stop people feeling."

Within this vision of empathy, the role of the practitioner becomes very specific: "Whilst lots of things need fixed, I think my job is to be alongside people as opposed to give them answers." Interviewees described this as a very demanding process, indeed much more demanding than offering advice. However, embedded within this understanding of empathy is a firm commitment to self-determination. As one interviewee said, "I think my capacity to connect with people and to be a useful presence is built on that core of care and belief they can find their own way."

Theme 10: Empathy legitimizes other experiences (9)

Case #2

I'm thinking about a conversation I was having yesterday with a guy who is estranged from his mother. There's a whole family business and lots of dynamics going on and he hasn't spoken to his mother now for a number of years but would like to re-establish contact. And his arriving point was wanting to re-establish contact if she will demonstrate that she is no longer siding with other members of the family but is actually willing to act on his behalf into the business. He felt she had betrayed him in that way previously and so she needed to prove herself in that way. He was full of his own emotions because of what he'd been experiencing. And the step that I saw happen for him was the moment at which he actually was open to the possibility that his mother also has feelings and a perspective that doesn't serve him in any way. It's not to his benefit that she has that. In fact, it is counter to what he wishes was the way of things. And the trap

that she is in, the bind that she's caught in in her situation. And so he's not fully accepted

it in his head because he doesn't want it to be so and he kinda still wants to argue against

it. That isn't how she should feel or it's wrong. He's still not saying it's okay, but he wasn't

just looking to bat it away as irrelevant or inconceivable. So just the flash of allowing

himself for a moment to notice what this must be like for her. That was the first time I saw

that available from him. And I don't know that he'll be able to stay there, but that he even

momentarily touched into it was, I think, really significant. We'll see.

Case #25

     A company came to do a hate crime workshop where they talked about their

experiences of hate crimes in Northern Ireland. And we had invited many, many people.

So we had invited community leaders, we had invited councilors (local politicians), we

had PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland), we had health service, we had educators,

we had university, we had local colleges, so we had a lot of people, a lot of stakeholders

and a lot of community, grassroots, on the ground people. And we were able to have a

very frank and open discussion about that. And I could see the difference that was making

even to the police. And I would imagine that PSNI have vast experience and have seen

some terrible things, you know, but just to have the likes of a major police leader

standing up and saying to the people that were gathered, 'We are going to make sure that

we look after you. If someone does this, we want to hear about it. We need to get it

reported. And we will make sure that you have an opportunity to enjoy your life here." So

it was deeply touching. And it's had an effect that they're going to ensure that this

approach is used now in training new recruits into PSNI. And also they're having

inspectors from each region that are going to be trained up and have these workshops as

part of their training. Just that power of empathy that you're talking about has had quite

an effect and has led to something that will hopefully make improvements in policy and

procedure.

Empathy can sometimes look like paying homage to another person's positions or

emotions. This can manifest in how a person responds to another verbally, whether

through a statement meant to demonstrate understanding (i.e. "I hope you don't think it

was easy for me to come here, because it wasn't - I don't suppose it was easy for you to

come, either"), softening their own language to be more inclusive (i.e. amending 'I don't

trust you' to 'I don't trust anybody'), or standing up for another's position (i.e. offering

solidarity in the face of danger or discomfort). It can also take the form of direct action,

such as the police leader actualizing his commitment to "look after" hate crime victims

by changing training policy in Case #25. Regardless, the first step is simply to

acknowledge that another way of perceiving the situation exists, as the son does with his

mother's perspective in Case #2.

The most powerful form of acknowledgment is one which simultaneously honors

another's pain and one's own complicity in creating or sustaining that pain. Interviewees'

examples of this sort of acknowledgment included people who had tortured, killed, and

terrified others, including someone who had cut a man's hand off and sent it to his wife

as a joke. When people who have done such damaging things genuinely ask for

forgiveness from those who have been harmed, that is proof of empathy. As one

interviewee said, "It's not just that we acknowledge it in our heads, that's not empathy.

It's when you look into the eyes of the Other and you witness their pain as a consequence of how you and your group have been functioning…It's not offered as manipulation. It's offered as an acknowledgement."

Another interviewee explored this idea further, invoking a police officer who, upon hearing about traumatic experiences involving his unit said, 'I knew about these things, but I never knew them.' "His acknowledgment [was] about knowledge and whether we theoretically, with just our tops of our heads, know about these things or whether we actually start to feel in our bones and in our muscles. Because then that bears a responsibility, once you carry knowledge at that level."

Theme 11: Empathy acts to meet the needs of others (8)

Case #5

I think the most courageous steps I've seen in the peacebuilding setting come from men who have previously been involved in violence and really knew the cost of that. They were all previous lifers. And they're talking about how they handle conflict and the danger of using competing or attempts to control another person as a way of handling conflict. They're reflecting back on their experience in prison where that was just too dangerous because you couldn't escape from each other and the potential for violence was just too risky. But I think what most struck me was the care the more senior men were showing to a young man in their setting and his struggles around needing to be the man in his community and in his home life as well. And so something I had never witnessed before was the care with which these more senior men both totally got what was going on for the junior guy in their midst, and just so gently made it okay for him

when they could so easily have laughed at him or squashed him or asserted their hierarchical dominance over him. A lot of that was very available and would be very normal in how they normally treat each other as well. It's not a nicey nicey group. They're pretty rough on each other a lot of the time. But in that moment where they really understood the significance of what was playing out for this young man and just totally shifting how they were going to talk about that in that group in order to make this okay.

Case #14

I was co-facilitating a huge event with loads of people in kind of lecture style room. Radio, tv, tons of people. I felt really stupid that I was helping co-facilitate it. And so on the stage, I was on one end, which was on the podium and across the wave of people on the stage was my co-facilitator and she was a Truth Commissioner. And in between was a well-known theologian and peacemaker and five women who had lost loved ones because of apartheid during the uprising. And they were a mixture of black and white. So it was very personal. I was very close to them even though there was all of this garish stuff going on. It felt really, really personal because these women had all brought little totems with them that they were holding in their hands and I could see it but I don't know that people in the audience could necessarily see it. So one by one they began to tell what happened to their son to their husband or mostly to themselves, but it was mostly to their loved ones. And they were so dignified and yet each of them wept. And when they wept, the theologian wept. And he was quiet but I could see his tears just streaming so then I started choking up because he was choking up, so then my co-facilitator was... and we were supposed to be in charge of this thing! But it was full of

dignity, it was full *of dignity and the weeping made sense and they should have been weeping. And there was* so *much pain and so much loss and so much honor being given to these women and to their loved ones who had died. But just seeing this famous anti-apartheid activist also weep out of deep compassion for them. That deep tenderness was incredibly powerful for me. And then, what was also very important to me is afterwards. We went offstage and my co-facilitator stops with all of this stuff happening, the tv cameras, and she kind of pulls these women together and two of them were living in a different township. And she said, "How are you getting home?" And they said, "Well, we'll just take a kompi (public transportation back.." And she said, "Absolutely not. It's 9:30 at night, you're not going back in a kompi. Are you hungry?" And the women said, "Yeah, I'm really hungry." And she said, "Well, what would you like?" And the women said, "I would like a bucket of Kentucky." And my co-facilitator said, "Alright, I'm gonna take you home right now." And it's a good 40 minute drive. So she takes these two women, stops for Kentucky, gets them a bucket, and spends the rest of the evening with them, not with the cameras. Not with the media event. So see, that kind of stuff really is powerful for me. She made a choice. And to me, it was the right choice.*

Empathy need not always take the form of action. In fact, one interviewee talked about how this is a key fact in understanding the difference between empathy and compassion. "I'm not saying that empathy is passive and compassion is active, but I think of empathy as a very internal thing and compassion as sometimes something there's a display of." However, when action is involved, it often takes the form of the way people talk to each other, the space they make for each other, and the comfort they offer. These

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actions are empathy made tangible, like picking someone up for an event, spending time with someone, or making sure someone has dinner and a ride home, as in Case #14. As one interviewee put it, empathy is about "being willing to be in each other other's lives and making the effort," even in the midst of a media circus.

Empathy can also look like pausing to let someone speak, not rushing someone, or recognizing a need by handing someone a tissue. Empathy can be listening to a colleague talk about how their day went, sending a thoughtful message, or acknowledging a child's emotions. It is demonstrated by your willingness to listen to another person's story (especially one that you don't think you're going to agree with). Empathy can sometimes take the shape of holding someone's hand or giving them a hug. Even something as simple as a cup of tea can signify: "thank you for coming here. I understand how hard it is to come… I understand how difficult it was for you to come here and I'm trying to make you feel comfortable…in [my] space."

Several interviewees described their parents as empathic role models who demonstrated daily what it looks like to empathize. One said, "I couldn't walk by [someone in distress] and I couldn't bypass because I had been raised by a father who really taught me to care for the world around me and to step towards people who were vulnerable and need help." Similarly, another interviewee said their understanding of empathy arose "through [my mother's] actions, I think through her work, and hearing stories of her work and the people that she was helping that were in difficult circumstances and her understanding of them as full humans."

One interviewee spoke about the mediators who sent messages across the peace walls to stop violence during the Troubles. "You don't know how many lives they may have saved." There were also church groups comprised of "people coming together and asking questions…giving each other permission to ask questions about the Other." That interviewee described the incredible impact of engaging across communities, especially on the youngest among us. "That's going to make a big difference if those children are hearing another voice and not going back to the ancestral voices."

A different interviewee described a contemporary project that is crossing the same community lines, and how people have managed to "find ways to participate even when they were barred from doing so by their organization." Cultural boundaries are often extremely difficult to cross, which made the actions of the men in Case #5, who reshaped their behavior to care for the most vulnerable among them, all the more remarkable.

Theme 12: Empathy consistently chooses the relationship (7)

Case #1

We were bringing families from the school where I was teaching to Corrymeela for Family Week. So I was there with my children and the children I was teaching were there with their families. So we're all families together having a holiday at Corrymeela. And there was a woman who came up and her child was at the school but although all the children had a physical difficulty of some sort, she hadn't thought, well, they're different religions. But the special schools are a bit like the integrated schools, they have a mixture of people from different backgrounds. And so, she was coming up on the bus and she was very unhappy. And she arrived up and she said, "This is terrible. I'm going

home." And she really wanted to go home, but we said, "Well, you know, we can't get transport for you until a wee bit later on. Would you not just hang out with us? We're going to go over to the Croí (a building at Corrymeela) for a welcome party, meeting all the volunteers and everything." And she said, "Mmm." She wasn't sure. So anyway, she walked over to the Croí and she came out again like a shot. She said, "I'm going home. I'm going home! You wouldn't understand, you wouldn't understand." So she saw this man coming down. He had his sleeves rolled up and he had several tattoos. You know, "God save Ulster" and all the rest. And she said, "This is the man for me." Immediate empathy. "This is the man for me." So she went up and she says, "I'm going home." "Why are you doing that?" he says. He was a volunteer. He was up driving the bus with the group from Shankill Road, I think. And he said, "Why are you doing that?" And she said, "It's a Catholic place here." "Why do you say that?" "There's a big cross in there." He says, "The cross is where Jesus died, you know. Do you not see those in your church?" "Of course," she says, "I'm a good Protestant. I know Jesus died on a cross." And then he said, "Well…" But she says, "There's a big candle in there." And he says, "Well, the candle's for the light of the world." And she says, "Are you going in?" And he says, "Yes." "Okay," she says, "I'll go in with you." And she went in with him and she sat beside a volunteer. And he was American. From the United States. Lovely young man, you know, 18-25 year-old there for the summer. And he was working with the families. And course she was sat beside him and she thought he was great. So she decided to stay on. And she was washing the dishes one time, washing the dishes, just washing the dishes. And she says, "Here," she says, "here dear, you're gorgeous. Are you married?" And he says, "I'm

afraid I'm not married," he says. "I'm a Catholic priest." Now. She looks at him and she

says, "You're never!" And she says, "Och, but you're different!" And he says, "Yes, I am.

You've accepted me for who I am rather than what I am." And that Wednesday she even

dressed up as a nun at the farewell party. Didn't want to go home at the end of it.

Case #18

     For one of the programs that I was running, we bring a very small group of key

leaders on a six-month personal, political leadership journey process together. This

particular group that I was working with was the smallest group, so quite an intimate

group. The program had grown out of work that focused on women's leadership and now

we'd decided that this program and the way people come together and share their self is

more human than only for women, and actually if we're serious about changing gender

norms and transformational spaces then men need to have these kind of relational spaces

created for them as well, especially in highly charged political situations. We're here

with six senior leaders from Myanmar, so we have some participants from the ethnic

armed groups, some from the ethnic majority. The variety of ethnic leaders we have all

hold quite high positions in the armed groups for which they are working and represent

and come from their struggle. There's also the dynamic within this group of those who

stayed in the country and those who fled during the riots and peaceful protests that were

violently put down in '88 and so continued their work outside of the country. So there's

lots of different: 'what was your role in the liberation, where were you in the movement?'

And during the first gathering, people come in quite poised. It was at that time a tense

moment in the peace process between those feeling like it was moving along and other

actors feeling like there wasn't a sense of solidarity within the ethnic groups. So the

ethnic parties were going along but leaving some of the smaller parties behind. So

there's big armed groups and small armed groups represented in this as well. So there's

lots of layers of tension or identity going on here. We're not explicitly saying this, but

we're trying to engender an experience together where people can move into more of

their personal story as opposed to their political positions and the party positions that

they hold. The personal and political at that level is so intertwined that that's quite subtle

to know if that's happening or not. So people were bristled and really sticking to the

party line for the first gathering. And then two months later we're together again. We've

had a bit more time together. And we were asking the guys to tell a story about what has

led them to this work. And people have quite moving stories about what brought them to

it, personal things happening to people's families with a sense of this can't happen to our

people again. One of the main leaders was a quite prominent political figure and human

rights activist and his notoriety was from his time spent as a political prisoner. Anyways,

there tends to be this perspective that if you weren't fighting, if you weren't in an armed

group and part of the revolution, you weren't part of the struggle for the new democratic

future that we envision for the country. And at the end of this day and half of quite

moving storytelling that these men chose to participate in, we were at dinner and we were

doing different toasts, and one of the guys said, "I now see that while we were fighting

with our guns in the jungle you were fighting with your pen from a jail."

Empathy can sometimes be demonstrated by starting an unexpected relationship.
One interviewee described someone they often co-mediated with, who would always try

to build an authentic connection with people he met, no matter how brief or transactional the conversation was expected to be. While traveling, he would make sure he could pronounce every taxi driver's name and inquire about how each hotel clerk's day was going. The interviewee relaying this story wasn't sure about all of this at first. In fact, they wondered if it was just a way to grease the wheel and get better service out of any given person. Gradually it became clear that instead, this was part of their colleague's ethic of everyday empathy. It's as if he were saying, "there's all this work we're doing that's meant to be really important, but right now, you are in front of me and I want to make an actual connection." The interviewee said their partner was 'giving the mundane its beautiful due' (Updike, 2003) by acknowledging the potential of every human encounter to be transformed from being about exchanging goods to being about exchanging stories, perspectives, and lives.

This is all well and good with strangers, but the real test of empathy is whether that commitment to curiosity can stick around during circumstances with higher stakes. One interviewee lauded the decision they sometimes see people make to "not just lose that [troubling] person or react against their behavior but to somehow stay connected with an expectation that means that we'll get somewhere else together." So rather than cutting out someone from your life completely, the empathic choice might be to choose to stick with the relationship. Another interviewee spoke about "the privilege of witnessing people who come with really deep hurt as a result at the hands of someone" and how extraordinary it is "for them to still be able to listen to those other sides to give, to reconcile."

In Case #18, previously unforgivable political choices were transformed in recognizable acts of courage. One interviewee talked about admiring those who can "step out of their conflict, their lens and begin to understand they're not the only ones who are oppressed. […] When you're in the middle of a conflict, you live it, you breathe it, it is, there is so much passion and there's so much focus on it." It is a remarkable thing to watch someone realize that "this [other] person is taking a ton of political risk. They're not just purely the enemy. They care about a peaceful future, too." This commitment to 'staying in relationship' is often felt quite viscerally. As one interviewee described, "the temperature changed, the tension dissipated, and a different kind of tension emerged instead. There was such a tenderness in how these men were talking to each other that felt really precious."

Some interviewees also described how powerful it is when a genuine friendship is formed. It is a radical act to "change your actual relationship with someone because of that experience of empathy, because of hearing enough about their story." One interviewee spoke of empathy being evident "when you form a deep relationship in a contested society where the spaces can often be few and far between to enable that to happen." In Case #18, the reluctant Corrymeela group member and the incognito priest were "living out the different possibility, a different set of realities where people from different backgrounds and traditions can be together."

Theme 13: Empathy asks expansive questions (5)

Case #11

I think there was a really interesting point when I was on one of the summer camps that I led. Part of the camp itself was to have an experience where they would be taken away from their normal environment of group in a room and they would explore good relations questions within being on an expedition. So we were canoeing and camping. And the session that we were in to develop these questions had a lead up to understanding each other and the development of who they are what they need and what their values and beliefs are. The group was in a really nice space after they had come back from break because they had continued that conversation on the outside of what we were already doing. And they came back into the room with some really insightful questions that I hadn't even really spurred them into from the session previous. So they'd all gone away, had chats about, "oh okay, so tell me more about your community in this way or community in that way." Then it went from not just the community question to when they've had experiences of feeling singled out for being a certain way or a certain type of thing. And then the co-creation of having all these questions thrown out into the room and people being open to answer really created a really nice environment of empathy because everybody was bouncing off each other. "Oh, I never knew that was a thing or that that held so heavy on your chest." It really opened people's eyes into opening engagement around an issue but also really nice and holding of the people within the room as well. Not just throughout conversation but it really helped the bonding happen as well.

Case #19

We were really privileged to have two US civil rights activists over with us for a week, and we held workshops with teachers. So the activists were sharing their testimonies, sharing their own personal journey and what brought them to stand up for civil rights, the injustices that they faced. I guess you knew there was empathy because the teachers were telling you by the questions they were asking. You could tell by the questions they were asking that they were trying to open up and further their understanding. They're empathetic questions. How did that feel? What did you do? Those kinds of things. It's hard to kind of exactly describe, but there was an atmosphere of empathy. So people weren't trying to trip each other up, they weren't trying to score points, they were very much focused on understanding better. You could also see it in the physical emotion that people had in their body language, some people were in tears when they're listening to those stories. So again it's kind of holistic. It's in what people say and how they say it, in their body, in their being. You can kind of read the empathy.

Empathy is demonstrated through "an interest and curiosity in the richness of people's lives," as displayed by the teachers when they interacted with foreign civil rights activists in Case #19. Interviewees described how empathy sometimes appears in the form of a question, but not just any question, because questions can be 'traps' that are self-serving and loaded and more about the questioner's agenda than anything else. Instead, empathy must take the form of a question "that's free to be a question." In Case #11, questions of that type "open[ed] up doors as opposed to close[d] doors" between young people on an adventure learning trip. For "doubt is a very important step in that

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journey of understanding… One question opens up six more. [You just need to] give the other point of view some hospitality.”

Singular Insights

What some themes lacked in quantity of repetition across interviews, they made up for in quality of insight. Therefore, in this section I am including a collection of ideas that were only mentioned by one interviewee each.

While empathy is often framed as tool for connection, one interviewee sees empathy as a tool for conflict analysis as well. Empathy can help researchers and practitioners alike think more clearly about what is happening in a given situation and can be an “analytical lens for how you understand what you’re actually working on.”

Another interviewee described how empathy can cross boundaries in times of tragedy. They recalled that when something really bad happened during the Troubles, people could be heard saying, ‘Oh my god, god help their family.’ “Whether it was one side or the other, they understood that, and they felt that loss.”

A different interviewee thought a great deal about what they call the isms (sectarianism, racism, sexism, etc) and their relationship to empathy. They recalled when they would begin every cross-community school group with instructions to the children to make friends with the other side, but not to talk about religion or politics. “And you’d say those things thinking that you were keeping them safe. But now that we know that sectarianism thrives in avoidance and denial…We were creating a situation where the children knew who was who. And maybe next time they see them in town they’d say,

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'There's a Prod!' We'd actually strengthened it." This interviewee's hope is that empathy helps us to "see the illogicality of some of the thoughts that come from the various isms."

Finally, one interviewee specifically lauded empathy as a normative imperative. "I morally believe [empathy] to be right and desirable. Even if it doesn't lead to a resolution of things. So if the instrumental value is removed, it still holds a value because it makes us better as people."

CHAPTER FIVE: HOW TO DESIGN FOR EMPATHY

Orientation

As we learned in the previous section, my interviewees believe that empathy shows itself in the way a person reacts to others, namely by being committed to curiosity, a non-judgmental presence, legitimizing other experiences, acting to meet the needs of others, consistently choosing the relationship, and asking expansive questions. And yet empathy also has its limits: it is always incomplete, does not require consensus and demands vulnerability. Overall, empathy changes everything it touches: our bodies, our agendas, our convictions, and even its own process of unfolding.

Once empathy has been properly identified and qualified, what happens next? Can it be taught, or at least encouraged? These interviewees offered vivid instructions for those seeking to create spaces that promote empathy. As eight people noted, it is important to establish first that empathy is emergent. That is, empathy is something that is created through interactions between people, as opposed to being an autonomous ingredient that can be added to a situation by the facilitator. Therefore, the cardinal rule seems to be that "not pushing people too soon or too fast into that [empathic] space is critical." You can't force empathy, lest it break. This edict is related to both efficacy and ethics – resistance is likely to skyrocket if people are caught off guard, and it is irresponsible to force people onto a deeper level of vulnerability than they have agreed to or prepared for.

Facilitators, then, must operate within the liminality between control and chaos. "It just takes a lot of intentionality as a practitioner and then you're only ever creating conditions… You can only create the container." This requires humility on the facilitator's part, and commitment to yielding enough power to the parties that they can change the direction of the conversation. "How those possibilities [for empathy] manifest is not up to you, it's up to them." Empathy, five interviewees agreed, is about the process rather than the result, about design but not prescription.

Empathy cannot be mandated, and is rarely related to a group agreement, even if someone happens to have written 'show empathy' on a flip chart. "It is so about the kind of environment that you're constructing and you're co-constructing. You can't force people into an empathetic space. You can't manufacture it and bring them into it. You have to co-create it." And yet, despite all of this uncertainty, empathy does indeed emerge, and often in the most unexpected places. One interviewee spoke of an example from a fellow practitioner's book (Ó Tuama, 2016) where LGBTQ people are gathered with Evangelical Christians, and a pastor asks the room at large: 'Are you telling me that my words bruise you? How many times have I said something that you found hurtful?' Someone responds, 'I stopped counting at 20.'

Though no interviewee took credit for the emergence of empathy in any facilitated space, they did acknowledge that a facilitator's presence can be critical to a positive engagement between parties. In order for that to be achieved, the facilitator must "hold a sense of conscious design," and the following lessons are the suggested elements of that design. Please note that this framework is drawn from the particular experiences

of these specific interviewees. Therefore, consider them less a one-size-fits-all check list for every group process, and more a set of guidelines to be applied as the facilitator sees fit.

Lesson One: Practice Facilitation (A Lot)

First, seven interviewees said, general facilitation skills are paramount. As one person put it, as a practitioner you need to "know your shit." Many details must be looked after in order to gather people well. "Where are we going to have this program? How are people going to feel? What kind of space are we going to use? How are we going to allow for listening? How are we going to allow people space to tell their story?" And then, after people are finally in the room together, comes the hard work of making sure the conversation runs smoothly, that new types of interaction are possible, and that everyone feels heard. "That's where confidence and competence has to come into this because when that [conversation] starts to unfold, it's an emergent process, it's not a linear process."

When the discussion starts to boil, the facilitator must have the political savviness to know when to go deeper and when to pivot to a new subject. They must also be able to "sit in a circle with a lot of tension and know how to hold it" and have "an acute sense of this silence is okay or this silence is not okay." Facilitators need to be "tracking what's happening in the conversation and the feelings behind it," checking in with parties on the sidelines as needed, and modeling, inviting, and normalizing desirable contribution types. Facilitators must also pay attention to their own body language, the pacing of the dialogue, the sequencing of subjects, and when everyone could use a break.

Facilitators also have the opportunity to enrich the conversation by "constantly reframing and trying to give multiple perspectives without diminishing the perspective [the parties] currently hold." It is also often useful to provide new vocabulary to the parties that will allow them to see emotions or situations in a new light, i.e. describing anger as "a secondary emotion to a primary hurt."

If it seems like it would be a Herculean effort to have all of these things in mind at once, it is astounding to realize that when it's going well, all of these subtle facilitative adjustments are virtually invisible to the parties. These are all skills born of context, practice, and intuition, and yet they are only the beginning of what is necessary in creating an empathy-friendly space.

Lesson Two: Choreograph the Engagement

Six interviewees spoke about how to attend to the "choreography of engagement" and set expectations between participants. Some of this can be accomplished largely through the co-creation of a group agreement for how participants will behave toward one another (using I statements rather than we statements, listening from the heart rather than the head, not interrupting, etc). However, what comes after the group agreement is framed by the facilitator.

One interviewee spoke about the importance of relieving the pressure on the participants and creating an environment where they don't feel that they have to prove themselves or stand for something. It's also important for facilitators to be intentional with the messages they send about what sort of meeting this will be, and how it might be different from previous interactions. This could happen by explicitly managing

expectations in the welcome speech or more subtle signaling via room set up, style of invitation, or choice of activities. The bottom line? "People have to know what they're going into."

Facilitators often find themselves working against engrained forces of habit or even culture, so sometimes it's necessary to acknowledge that reality. One interviewee described their internal monologue as: "You're usually gathered in this kind of way, we'll kind of roll with that right away. We don't need to immediately interrupt it, that would be too much dissonance in this moment. But we're not gonna stay here. We're going to move into a different way of being together." It may be necessary to prove to participants over and over again, and in many different ways, that this will not be a "transactional space," but a "relational space."

Six interviewees talked about the power of the facilitative cues and how critical it is for practitioners to model empathy in every interaction with the group. This modelling is not explicit (as in 'watch me doing empathy now') but expressed instead in the way the facilitator chooses to respond to questions and employ classic techniques like paraphrasing and reframing. One interviewee said, "In trying to be present to [the parties], I'm trying to model how I want them to be or to see their potential to be. So I'm trying to be this non-anxious presence in the room and to be open to what they're saying."

Participants resist this process so often that one interviewee said, "I'm surprised when people aren't resisting in some way." When resistance does happy "super-diligence" is necessary. One interviewee reflected, "My role, I think, is still to provide challenge. And if you step back too much from that you may not be serving the person.

You may be letting the person off the hook from a difficult topic. […] So you're empathetic to the situation that person finds themself in, but you're also saying, 'and that's not good enough.'"

Lesson Three: Know What You're Doing and Why You're Doing It

Nine interviewees talked about the knowledge and self-possession necessary on the part of the practitioner. Inherent within facilitation is the responsibility to understand the dynamics of conflict and group interaction deeply. As one interviewee put it, "You can't just hack certain people together and assume it's all going to be great. It needs finesse." And while conflict analysis is critical, it's also important that facilitators "don't intellectualize too much. […] Even the most brilliant analytical skills will fall short if you aren't able to listen."

Continual reflective practice is paramount in order to avoid perpetually "trundling through the world on a certain trajectory" and missing the specifics of the current situation. If facilitators don't work to suspend their own judgment, no matter how informed by experience it might be, they risk creating self-fulfilling prophecies and thwarting the chance for unexpected connection and creativity to flourish. One interviewee said they hold "a commitment to see where things go, versus assuming this person's never going to budge their position and this person's always going to hate this person. Because actually, I am often proven wrong on those things."

Two interviewees described empathic facilitation as an act of love, saying that in any group process, it is essential for facilitators to hold "a deep, deep love and commitment to the humanity of each person there." One found particular solidarity in this

study, as they often feel "out on a limb," even amongst other practitioners. "I describe my work as multipartial," they said, juxtaposing the term 'multipartial' with the more typical 'impartial' or 'neutral.' Of training new mediators, this interviewee said, "I expect them to love the people they are working with. […] They can dress it up and call it something else if they want, but that is what I expect."

Lesson Four: Co-Create Safe Space

Seven interviewees described the importance of 'safe spaces' in promoting empathy, adding much-needed nuance to an ever-present bit of our of peace and conflict lingo. One said, "You can say that [you've created a safe environment] all you want, but if you don't actually do it, you'll know when you walk in that room that you can't answer or ask a question." In order for space to feel safe, another said, "The folk involved need to have had sufficient control over the crafting of it." A safe space must have "co-created boundaries" that allow the facilitators to guide and challenge the parties, set the pace of the discussion, and shut down contributions that could send people into defensive mode. Facilitators must be "intentionally creating conditions where people feel safer to be vulnerable," especially in any situation where "fear and fracture is dominating." Safe spaces do not provide a coddling security blanket, but nourishment of basic human needs. In any given group, every participant is implicitly asking, 'Is it safe? Who's in charge? Do you like me?' One interviewee reflected, "If their alarm bells are so high, I think I try to attend to what's sounding the alarm."

One way of attending to the concerns, another interviewee mused, is simply by reflecting the misgivings of the participants back to them. "If it's clearly someone who

doesn't want to connect to the group in a particular situation, to go alongside them and whatever they say to you, you say back to them. So if they say, 'I hate this group,' 'You hate this group.' 'I never want to see them again,' 'You never…'" This interviewee described initial skepticism about using this tactic, fearing that direct parroting would seem annoying or insulting. But then it started to work. "Just by providing that mimicking or repetition of words back…was, for me, a very powerful tool of reducing the stress hormones. [..] Which is, I guess what empathy is. […] We need to speak to the emotion before we can speak to the head in a highly stressed situation."

According to three interviewees, the qualities of the physical space are also essential for participants to feel safe and cared for. Facilitators should pay attention the set-up of the room and where people will be seated. Special food helps, as does tea. The goal is to create a space that says: "You're being minded differently here. You're here for a different kind of conversation."

Three interviewees talked about how important it is for parties to be on an equal playing field. They must be well-matched in terms of communication skills and scope of ability to participate, especially when they are representing entities and interests beyond their own. Participants must also have similar credibility, experience, gravitas, and willingness to be vulnerable. This is deeply tied to the notion that, if an imbalance exists, facilitators must actively attend to the power differential between parties in order for this equal playing field to exist. It is also important to note that co-creation of space and empathic expression may both be severely limited if facilitators are not cognizant of and responsive to the reality that they themselves are in a position of power.

Facilitators must show respect for the group by "do[ing] the work ahead of time to try and imagine what might be blockages to those things and setting them straight." This involves "picking the right kind of activity that is safe enough for them to explore, but not in a deep way where it might make them feel vulnerable and shut down." The plan should account for participants' backgrounds, influences, connections, and current wishes.

Five interviewees noted that the amount of time parties have spent together can be a significant factor in whether or not they feel safe, and it may influence the ability a facilitator has to create a safe space. As one person put it, "the more time you have, the more possibility you have." Another interviewee talked about the importance of strong bonds, spaces, and relationships that had been formed over years. Another said of the parties involved in an instance of empathy that they "had been working together for a long time in hard ways, knew each the Other to be someone who would stick at it." Someone else said that empathy is about "a whole lot of trust being built over a whole lot of years with showing up year after year so that the parties can say, 'I see that you're committed to us. We trust you now and I will now take my time and come be part of this work.'"

Lesson Five: Venture Beyond Dialogue

While most interviewees operate using some form of dialogue, ten were keen to point out that other activities can provide space for empathy by "helping people discover each other in new ways, without words." The first option is experiential learning in the great outdoors. One interviewee is a great proponent of coasteering, which involves

jumping off cliffs into the sea. "Some of the cliffs are quite high and people don't want do it. And then they do want to do it. And then they do it, and they feel amazing." It is a powerful bonding experience when people encourage each other and take the plunge together. "If you're in a process of really trying to push yourself out of your boundary levels and you overcome that, and then you feel really good about yourself and you remember the people around you within that environment."

Visual, written, and performance art can all be tremendously useful pathways into empathy. One interviewee described introducing some informal space into a strictly orchestrated dialogue by taking the group to the circus. Another said that using a children's story that recasts the wolf as the protagonist rather than the traditional three little pigs helped to develop the "muscle for empathy" within the group. And in Case #22, the project in which 4,000 people in church communities discuss Brexit through the lens of the Book of Ruth, "the biblical text functions as a way into difficult conversations" about borders and belonging.

If a group member creates a piece of art or brings a professional piece to share, the process of explaining the meaning to others and taking questions can open up the discussion. As one interviewee described, someone might say, "I know you've come up with this, but for me it looks like this. Is that what you were thinking, too?" The same person also lauded "just getting a bit of clay… not creating anything, but the process itself of having clay in your hands, and the conversation around the table" can make space for empathy, as well.

Another interviewee often uses puppetry in their work because "the lovely thing about a puppet is that you can get inside them." To introduce the experience, the interviewee leads all puppeteers in something called the Magic Eye Test. "You look at the [puppet] and close one eye and say three times, em-pa-thy, em-pa-thy, em-pa-thy. And wow! You're inside that person. You can see what they see, feel what they feel, and understand a wee bit about them and what it's like to stand in their shoes. […] That's really how I've been using the puppets, to raise awareness around the Other and around ourselves and how we can learn about ourselves by being inside the Other."

This interviewee described many moments that seemed to generate lightning bolts of empathy on the part of puppeteers of all ages. One example was Case #8, in which the interviewee asked a youth leader to take up a puppet character with a very different experience of the highly contested Northern Irish parading season. While reflecting on the experience of reacting as the character to another puppet's actions, the youth leader said, "Whenever you said I had no right, I responded as a human being told that I had no right to walk down a road. And I responded and then I looked at the character. I'm from the Ormeau Road and I'm always resisting the Orangemen walking down the Ormeau Road. I still don't want them walking down the Ormeau Road, but I have to find another way of speaking to them." The interviewee who set up the experience attributed the youth leader's newfound commitment directly to the puppeteering experience. "He immediately had empathy with this character…he didn't see it until then. His feelings were aroused, he responded, and then he looked, and he saw who's talking. And that made him think again." As another interviewee said, "if we read, if we see movies, listen to music, get

lost in nature, those things also build empathy because it's expanding us and connecting us."

There is also a lot of potential in using other people's accounts of their lived reality as a springboard for empathy. "I think that humans are good at understanding how the lessons of one situation apply to another situation. […] When people are hesitant to be vulnerable, if it doesn't seem like it's about them and their conflict…it feels lower risk." One interviewee worked with high school students from England who came to learn about the conflict in Northern Ireland. As they learned about conflict models and theories, one student wanted to apply it to his own family. "There was some logic that somehow allowed him to tap into his empathy. […] For him it was an understanding of the dynamics of conflict that allowed him to see, 'oh there are different perspectives. I can use those to approach my mother differently and to experience empathy for her.'"

Another interviewee regularly upends the familiar task of comparing and contrasting in their classroom by putting up photos of people from around the world and asking students to talk about how they are the same as the person in each photo. It is particularly compelling to talk about current events because "where there's something really raw and real that's happening in the exchange, it pulls, it tugs, it really tugs at the heart." Even better are situations where people from different contexts can meet in person and surprise each other. While describing a woman who was shocked to find herself enjoying the company of a Catholic priest, one interviewee said, "she was disarmed by [his] youth and the fact that he came from somewhere else. Different accent, different part of the world…that was a wee step toward the rest of her understanding."

One interviewee uses the stories of history "to build empathy, particularly in young people, through real life events, through understanding what's happened in the past." Another spoke about how people often find empathy easier "whenever it doesn't involve [them] and [their] views" and that traveling is a surefire way to capitalize on that. Describing an upcoming trip that they're facilitating for a cross-community group, one interviewee said, "We're hoping that that sense of being able to empathize with other countries that have seen conflict will also enable us to look in a different way at our conflict in Northern Ireland, and to really try and push that forward and try and ensure that this doesn't happen again."

Lesson Six: Admit That Empathy Is Not a Panacea

While empathy can accomplish many positive things, interviewees were emphatic that empathy not be cast as the be-all and end-all for intervention. Empathy "is not a singularly good thing. It is an emotional response to a context, and before that emotional response occurred there was a past, and then there's going to be a future. And empathy by itself does not determine what the future is going to be any more than it can overcome the past." Another interviewee said, "Empathy can be used across a whole host of ends. It's not a vision in and of itself, and it's a mistake to think that it is." For example, empathy can be used as fodder for violent action, as in "I really understand everything you're saying, and I still want to kill you." Ultimately, "empathy by, in, and of itself doesn't say anything about an agenda." In this way, empathy building is subject to the same critiques of contact theory. "Great - you've brought a lot of people together, you've created a lot of relationships, but so what?"

Interviewees also made clear that empathy should not be the sole focus of any given intervention. Reasons for this exist on a spectrum, the simplest being that empathy makes everything more complicated. "It's easier to know what to do if, perhaps, you just see a little bit of the person, as opposed to their backstory." But more important still, empathy does not justify all actions, and "understanding someone's backstory might stop you actually holding to account the behavior." It's also the case that empathy "may make something else possible but it doesn't make everything possible." In Case #9, one interviewee described a man who showed a cross-community group a dent in his skull that had been created by an axe wielded by someone who shared his identity. After that moment of vulnerability, "there was real empathy in that room." However, the issue on the negotiating table was parading parameters and "the reality of the situation meant as much as they understood each other and connected with each other, they actually couldn't deliver what the other needed and sell it back to their own community."

Four interviewees advanced the notion that empathy is difficult enough when you are only representing your own views, but it becomes a veritable minefield when you are representing a larger community or analyzing a conflict as a whole. One interviewee described how a purely empathic response to an external conflict could easily ignore the broader context of politics and injustice and sacrifice systemic understanding. Another interviewee described the complications of speaking publicly about one's views on a particular international conflict: "People can empathize so much with the injustice that's meted out to the Palestinians in the West Bank that they can then appear to be antisemitic. So they express a view about injustice and it is seen or felt by someone else

to be antisemitic…So I think on the international front it is actually quite difficult sometimes to express empathy with the people…without hurting or seeming to be taking sides."

When a person is negotiating on behalf of a specific community, empathy could lead them to misrepresent their party or to make an untenable agreement. One interviewee has witnessed times when "the negotiators get too close, or are perceived even to get too close, and therefore whatever they come out with is viewed with suspicion or as unrepresentative. Therefore, it fails and leads to more conflict." And empathy can be perilous even when exhibited by a person who isn't a formal representative of a community. As one interviewee put it, "I think in Northern Ireland we're nearly scared to ask questions. We have this hangover from The Troubles where, as Seamus Heaney (1975) would have said, 'whatever you say, say nothing.'" In describing their own experience speaking about identity, the interviewee said, "Even for someone that's very, very open and has spent a long time working in peace, it's complex… It's been difficult for me to actually stand up and talk about Irish culture because I feel that there's only so much that I can claim as mine. […] If you don't have that connection, that safe space, and, I suppose, the willingness as well to connect, it's very difficult for empathy to emerge."

A lack of empathy is often treated as a dangerous defect or an antisocial choice. However, four interviewees were adamant that there are recognizable and legitimate reasons for people to choose not to empathize with everyone all the time, as in case #7, which described the struggle faced personally by an interviewee when meeting the person

responsible for planting the bomb that had killed a family member. "I was just so aware of the years of story in my family... So it wasn't just that I could or couldn't be empathic. A lot of revenge is based on fidelity to the dead. It's based on not wanting to be unfaithful to the story previously held. So I could understand why people don't want to give up that story, which means they won't be empathic." Overall, "not wanting to think about something doesn't mean you're not empathic. It could just mean you don't want to think about that right now cause it's too sore." This interviewee urges all of us to get out of the "awful binary" of empathy. "You don't care about people. You really care about people…Well, There are reasons why people care and don't care."

Someone's personal history can limit empathy as well. The "capacity [for empathy] sits in all of us, but often it's dormant when we live out of judgement and anger." And "if you feel constantly under attack…there's a hierarchy of needs that kicks in. […] "Hurt has a limiting factor." Interviewees talked about how if something bad had happened in a group setting when someone was young, then empathy easily could be a struggle years later. And a person's upbringing could be a factor, too. "The limits are around personally what you think is possible and then your history of what relationships can be."

Beyond the experiential limits of empathy, there can also be systemic limits. One interviewee described working with young people who had been throwing petrol bombs and couldn't or wouldn't accept public affirmation from the facilitators. Taking a compliment from an authority figure would be a sign of weakness. "The system that you're operating in determines a lot about what's allowed." Another interviewee talked

about how apathy can overshadow empathy, especially in the cultural consciousness of media and cultural stereotypes. All of these powerful influences "can swamp [empathy] and make it go."

Four interviewees discussed the relativity of empathy as a goal depending on the type of work being conducted. One said, "For a conflict to transform there needs to be understanding, empathy, and connection happening in a new way for people…but that's only a goal if that is the work we're doing." However, that same interviewee acknowledged that while they want to respect the wishes of the parties, they are "most interested in doing work where [empathy] is part of what is possible." Another interviewee relies on experience and intuition to determine whether is the right time for empathy to be a goal, and whether the hurt between people is deep enough. If both of those conditions exist, this interviewee will "definitely try to encourage that through the storytelling and guiding and asking well what was that like for you when that happened."

Another interviewee said, "Sometimes [empathy] is the only goal, other times it's allied to" what's needed. "If there's a workplace dispute, I'm rarely asked in to increase the empathy. I'm asked in to get people to become productive and work again. But what I won't do is force people, and all the way through I'll be trying to humanize the whole process, because unhealthy conflict dehumanizes. And that's not good for productivity. According to a different interviewee, empathy "is a good goal to aspire to. It's just not always practical." So sometimes the facilitator will need to "create a seed to grow that will come alongside whatever they're doing."

Lesson Seven: Acknowledge Your Own Edges

One interviewee described how, especially when you have "cases that put you at the sharp end of people's distress," empathy is "exhausting. There is only so much empathy in the battery." Another interviewee mentioned that same well of empathic energy, and what happens when it runs dry. "If you run out of energy, it will stop working for awhile." Not only will it stop working, but it can also cause temporary or permanent damage. "If you're doing it all the time and you're working with a whole big wide range of people, you can suffer a bit from it… It can be a wee bit much sometimes."

In certain cases, personal boundaries can become brick walls around a practitioner's empathy. While describing a brother who has developed strong political views that contrast strongly with their own, one interviewee said, "I understand his life's story. I know everything that's ever happened to him, and so I can't understand how he could come to some of the conclusions that he's come to. But I still love him. I can still experience empathy when I see him in pain in other contexts, but not when it comes to why he would vote the way that he would."

They went on reflect on the role of empathy when there are very serious values conflicts or when there's been violence. "The role of empathy is that it keeps you in the room with that person." This interviewee proposed a conflict intervention, especially for the state of politics in the US, where people agree to swap family members for the purpose of talking politics. "Because I feel like we're so divided right now as a country, and I feel like I can engage in really constructive ways with people who have very different beliefs than me, but not if they're my brother. So I want to find someone who is

him, but isn't him, to have those conversations with. And they can talk to someone like me."

Another interviewee acknowledged, "There are moments that I've reached the edge of what I'm capable of." In the wake of an incident where a house had burned down with three small children in it, the interviewee recalled a conversation they had with a man who was convinced that the parents of the children had allowed the children to burn in order to prove a political point. "It stretched my empathy beyond what was available. It just, well yeah. It had snapped." In hindsight, the interviewee believes they could have asked the man to talk about the children in his life, and that maybe some kind of connection could have grown from there. And yet, "my own kids were not that much older than the kids that had died at the time, so I was really experiencing what he was saying to me as a mother and not as a mediator."

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Many of these interviewees articulated that the act of being interviewed about empathy was a useful exercise in and of itself. They mentioned the merits of considering their work through the lens of empathy, calling their experience with this study "very interesting," "super needed," and "really reflective." One said, "I'm finding it quite invigorating to reflect. […] It's a nice opportunity to hear my own thoughts." While empathy may be an 'instinctual' part of the practice, these reflections suggest that its intentional investigation is vital for the integrity and imaginative life of practitioners.

Interviewees described how empathy is an innate but largely unexamined aspect of their peacebuilding work and articulated the thirteen key aspects of empathy: it reshapes your dearest convictions, is always incomplete, is a catalyst and begets itself, is embodied and embrained, demands vulnerability, does not require consensus, is determined to be curious, pauses your agenda, is a non-judgmental presence, legitimizes other experiences, acts to meet the needs of others, consistently chooses the relationship, and asks expansive questions.

Some of these ideas about empathy bore a striking resemblance to theories already present in the literature. The notion that empathy starts with the self resonated strongly with the intersubjectivity of Lomas (2015) and Buber (1958), and the idea of empathy as nonjudgment echoes Strauss (2016). The embodiment of empathy brought to mind research in neuroscience and biology, like Klimecki (2015) and Bruneau (2012). And when the interviewees insisted that empathy is often integral to positive progress in

peacebuilding, they echo those scholars who advocate its nuanced understanding and practice in our field, such as Cerasani (2015) and Sinclair & Monk (2005).

When it comes to designing for empathy, the interviewees believed that while empathy is emergent, a practitioner can put interventions together in ways that may make empathy more likely to show up. Interviewees suggest that in order to design for empathy, you must: practice facilitation (a lot), choreograph the engagement, know what you're doing and why you're doing it, co-create safe space, venture beyond dialogue, admit that empathy is not a panacea, and acknowledge your own edges. This vision of facilitation aligns strongly with best practices that already exist in the facilitation world writ large, suggesting that empathy flows from every aspect of good facilitation, and that no practice has cornered the market on empathy cultivation. Put differently, impeccable facilitation makes many things possible, including empathy.

For these interviewees, empathy is a tool in a toolbox and the stitch that holds people together. It is about seeing from a new angle, whether it's just a glance or a totally transformed appreciation for another's journey. Empathy is an investment in the emotional landscape of understanding, and to empathize is to offer hospitality of the mind. Empathy can transform a cardboard cutout into a living, breathing person. And above all else, empathy is real and requires room to grow.

And while primarily this has been a work about providing a more robust description of this omnipresent and ethereal part of our field, this data also leads me, spurred on by the critiques of Shuman (2005) and Oliver (2015), to suggest that examining empathy is also critically important to the ethics of our field. As demonstrated

in this collection of stories, empathy is hard and destabilizing work. You may find yourself on the long road to dancing with the opposition, examining a puddle with a small child an inopportune moment, or bringing your Other to life through puppetry. What's more, empathy has a troubling habit causing you to question your very instincts (from meeting someone who took a family member's life to choosing not to hug someone whose father is dying).

Shuman has coined the idea of empathic unsettlement, or "a willingness to live on a precipice of continuing unsettling realities" (2011, p. 153). Oliver takes it a step further, insisting that we must not stop until "our confidence as seers or knowers is shaken to its foundations" and that "our inability to know, to see, to recognize, must keep us awake at night" (2015, p. 486). I believe we can use these exhortations, along with the insights gained from those interviewed in this thesis, to strip empathy of its fluffy charade and reveal the rippling muscles beneath. We must learn to embrace this most uncomfortable of processes, for it is the only thing that will save us from the stabilizing but stifling notions we hold about ourselves, each other, and the world.

We cannot afford to be silent or stagnant about this critical component of our work, and the time is ripe to claim empathy as what it truly is: the normative and intricate beating heart of peacebuilding and conflict resolution practice. The practitioners I interviewed have given us considerable insight into the uses, limits, nuances, and possibilities of empathy in specific instances of peacebuilding practice. I hope these findings will be valuable to anyone who deals with human relationships (which, in the end, is all of us). Ultimately, the portrait of empathy rendered here is compelling, but

incomplete. We must not shy away from continuing to explore and add definition to this messy, emotional, and decidedly partial aspect of the work of being human.

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