

## Week 27: The Essential Building Block of Belonging

Dusk is descending when I arrive home from work and walk in the back door.

Some nights, all is well when I get home—my wife is happy and the kids are smiling. But some nights, my wife is tired and worn thin after a long day at work and the onslaught of demands for food and attention. Some nights, Aidan is cloaked in the sullenness of adolescence. Some nights, Quinn is distraught about the inevitable injustices of a middle child. Some nights, my daughter will settle for nothing less than a Daddy mirror—a father who will show his interest by reflecting all her energy and joy.

Some nights, everyone wants a little empathy and, some nights, I don't want to give it.

Some nights, I get home, and I want someone to notice how tired I am, to soothe my anxiety, to correct the injustices done to me, and to mirror *me*. I *could* embrace my fatigue, fear, anger, and neediness as common emotional ground and I *could* reach out and connect in the midst of that shared experience. But, some nights, I don't. Because even for psychologists, empathizing with the people we belong to is hard to do. For at least five reasons:

1. **I don't want to go first.** In any relationship, both members need to be the recipient of empathy. But at any given moment, empathy is unidirectional—it can only flow in one direction at a time. *Which means someone has to go first.* Someone has to be willing to meet the needs of the other, before their own needs are met.
2. **I don't agree with you.** Empathy requires us to place ourselves in another person's shoes, to allow our hearts to beat to the rhythm of theirs. We often fundamentally disagree with their perspective, and so we are tempted to *debate* them intellectually, rather than *join* them emotionally. Empathy is putting connection before correction.
3. **What if I get it wrong?** When we try to place ourselves squarely inside of someone else's emotional landscape, it can be a little scary. It's unfamiliar territory. They are inviting us in, but what if we get it all wrong? Empathy can be terrifying if we have any perfectionism within us, because empathy is messy. Empathy is being brave for the sake of belonging.
4. **I don't want to feel that.** On the other hand, you might know *exactly* what someone else is feeling. It may bring up thoughts and feelings in you that you would prefer to avoid. Empathy is the willingness to wear someone else's shoes—it's not just understanding what another person feels; it's

actually *feeling* it. This is courageous, because to feel someone else's pain and fear and frustration, you first have to be willing to feel your own. Empathy is hearing someone else's story, finding a reference point in your own story, and then making the emotional landscape you see there the common ground upon which you both can stand.

5. **It's *not* my job to fix you.** We confuse empathy with "fixing." We think we have to do something to take the emotion away, and we don't want to be put on that hot-seat. Or some of us will have the opposite reaction: I'm *going* to fix you. But this undermines our ability to provide empathy as well. Because empathy is not fixing. Empathy is *joining*.

If we want to give empathy in our relationships, we will have to sacrifice some values we hold dear:

We will have to be willing to lose, because it will *feel* like losing—our people's needs are being met before our own, and our ego doesn't like that. Yet, when our egos lose, our hearts win.

We will have to put aside all of our *intellectual* debates. Empathy is not a matter of deciding who is right and wrong. It is simply a matter of finding an *emotional* common ground.

We will have to be willing to get it wrong, because we *will* get it wrong. Empathy is messy. There are no three-easy-steps to accurately understanding the people we love.

We will have to be okay when our people tell us we're not getting it. *And then we will have to try again.*

We will have to embrace our discomfort, because empathy will take us into some uncomfortable places within ourselves.

And we will have to quit trying to fix things. There will be a time for that later. For now, empathy is about connecting *within* an experience, not making the experience *go away*.

I wish I could tell you I always find my way to empathy with my family, but I can't. Some nights I do and some nights I don't. And *you* won't always find your way to empathy, either. But that's okay. That's not the point. The point is that we begin to *try*.

Because empathy isn't just for therapists, it's for *all* of us.