

# Creative Compassion - Towards a culture of Relational Empathy

I.

There is the idea that Focusing is likewise opening up to self-compassion and compassion for people who are not „us“.

This is true as long as existential needs are covered sufficiently (on both sides). It becomes complicated when diversity of culture, gender, religion, nationality or attitude is paired with status, privileges or power of majority.

How can we take into account what is needed from the perspective of „the other“ when our own needs are ignored, our status dismantled, our attempts for progression cut down non stop?

These questions are burning questions in times when social justice is the call of hour. It was a dream that helped me forward these questions. It depicted an image saying, 'even in times of ... there is art'. The dream (and exhibitions on persecuted arts) brought the term 'Creative Compassion' to my mind, and I started to create a practice that introduced arts based Relational Empathy first to myself and then to others.

II.

Compassion is known as an attitude rooting in *agape* (selfless love). Compassion is generally seen as part of moral ethics. The idea of compassion can be symbolised in the image of *Sara's circle* (Mathew Fox). *Sarah's Circle* is a theological metaphor of the Old Testament standing for connectedness, social justice and inclusion.

Compassion is integrative as the circle is. It is not exclusive as the famous dream of *Jakob's ladder* suggests. The metaphor of *Jakob's ladder* (Old Testament) tells about the opportunity to live in grace and climb top. Falling out of grace comes with a deep crash.

Individual thriving and orientation towards success seems to stand opposite to the ethics of *Sarah's circle*: The symbol of the circle has no upwarding spirale for personal agency or progression of the individual. The ethics of the collective seem to be guideline.

It can be attractive to live *circle* when it comes to emotion and communication or feeling and sensing; and to live *ladder* when it comes to personal benefits, social priviledges, materialistic advantages or political empowerment.

This is the point where Relational Empathy (RE) comes into play.

Relational Empathy (Maureen o`Hara) is the capacity to respond flexible towards individualistic *and* collective issues depending on the given situation. The capacity for RE implies to be able to pendule between an egocentric and a sociocentric world view. RE enables to tune in to a specific situation and the specific needs of the humans involved from felt empathy.

Relational Empathy offers an alternative to living socially exclusive (with indifference to minorities or the marginalised) or socially inclusive (with indifference to personal thriving or need for individualistic progression). RE is a creative way of polyphoning life's dichotomics symbolised by *circle* and *ladder*. RE opens up to multiplicity in terms that the Bigger Picture of life is holding both the life of the individual and the life of the collective with all its complexity of relationships. In such RE is life affirming. It holds a promise of fulfillment.

III.

Relational Empathy is an attitude that can be learned and trained. Any training needs a format to start with. A Focusing based Creative Compassion practice can offer a user-friendly entry to the basics of RE-attitude.

Practitioners learn to resonate to and hold inside personal preferences and limitations. They approach what they feel attracted to and easily can identify with - standing for: something of ME HERE (egocentric view).

They also approach what they are desinterested in or not attracted to and hesitate to identify with - standing for: something of THE OTHER/of you there. Practitioners learn to creatively process both orientations towards a positive outcome paying respect to both poles (sociocentric view).

Taking Focusing and the arts as floor for building basic RE-skills has a lot of advantages. Focusing is a vehicle to connect to the inside allowing a bodily feeling to come up as handle depicting what feels true. The arts can offer a safe container for to process difficult feelings. They allow to symbolise what cannot be made explicit in words.

Within the arts the practitioner can use canvas and paints to learn about general aspects of life that are dichotomous (and usually exclusive), such as: Inside-out, included-excluded, a part-the whole, top-bottom, calm-dynamic, dark-light, framed-unframed, chaotic-regulated etc. Those dichotomies of life can be represented through artistic forms, lines and color symbolisation.

Arts engagement allows to create linear forms (representing private or collective space and protective borderlines) that do not have to be rigid. Those lines can be blurred, exceeded or dissolved. They stand for 'opening up' instead of 'blocking off'. This allows the practitioner to master what is difficult in day to day situations being agent of their artistic action.

Exploring dichotomies of life within a mindful and embodied art practice has direct impact on the practitioner as person. It can change their understanding of the world.

During art activities the body sense of the practitioner is actualised implicitly (Laury Rappaport), launching its own sense of organismic ethics (the ethics of the life forwarding movement). Organismic ethics are - without exception - positive and supportive. They are a vibrant source for finding out about one's own socioethical orientation. Art making in itself is ethic-free, and it can generate new ethics.

#### IV.

A body sense being actualised through artmaking makes the practitioner being part of a First Person Science (Eugene Gendlin). The moment their body is operating as an inner laboratory of evidence (that is: truth and validation felt from within), the practitioner gets access to meaning beyond cultural knowledge, cultural habits and cultural relating. This is important, as any ethical standard is culturally structure-bound and dependent on cultural or religious framing.

According to Gendlin any practice of First Person Science is stepping out of cultural frames and concepts. First Person Science is generating embodied meaning that implies more than any already known concept and scheme can reveal.

Using the body as an inner laboratory of evidence, the practitioner steps into deconstructing and reconstructing their ideas of culturally bound ethics. They are enabled to rebind to a sense of human connectedness that is beyond already known framing.

The process of sorting out new ideas of how to be in the world from a standpoint of felt humanness is highly self-empowering. Feeling self-empowered is reducing fear and opening up to see other people be empowered too. The process of becoming aware of and change one's mindset through arts based action is a process of consciousness-building-in-agency.

#### V.

The journey of building Relational Empathy takes place in the context of the arts with reference to the body sense. This is what the term 'Creative Compassion practice' stands for.

The practitioner makes their start within an safe framed setting, set up from Focusing attitude. They perceive and reproduce material from the Fine Arts, experience intermodal shifts and find new ways of self-expression through active arts engagement.

The practitioner starts from a stand of indirect creativity that is more common to most of us (receptive arts engagement). From there the practitioner steps towards learning about empathy as a person doing arts, as a person relating to their inner Artist and their inner self, and as a person relating to another artist.

How can this be when the practitioner is doing Creative Compassion practice on their own?

When being involved in embodied arts engagement the practitioner is relating to the invisible artist who speaks through the Fine Arts picture of reference. Their message comes through, the practitioner cannot shut down from this.

It can happen that the practitioner likes the professional artwork (or parts of it) and dislikes the artist behind the reference picture. Nevertheless without the artist the artwork the practitioner feels attracted to would not exist. So whether the practitioner likes the artist or not, relating to someone within the reference picture is happening and part of the process.

In daily life the practitioner may feel uncomfortable relating to significant others, especially when disliking them or disliking their attitudes, cultural habits or religious practices. In Creative Compassion practice the Inner Artist of the practitioner and their body sense are doing the relational work.

This is of high benefit especially when the personal background of the practitioner contains feelings of isolation, being expelled or bullied, or when the practitioner feels powerless and helpless. Going out into the world and encounter people who are challenging might then be too big a step to do.

Being enabled to artistically relate to someone else (to the professional artist-within-the-picture) is enlivening. It bridges the gap between the idea of "me here" (in my atomic zone of perceiving the world) and "you there/the other" (in a world I cannot reach out to).

The practice of Creative Compassion is implicitly training interactive skills even when being practiced on its own.

## Benefits of Creative Compassion practice:

- The practitioner steps into aesthetic encounter with another human and their artistic life story (encounter with the creator of the reference picture and their historical, social, cultural and artistic framing).
- The practitioner is relating artistically in other ways than they relate in daily life, plus they experience Focusing based relating. The crossing of these two different ways of relating is powerful and self-affirming.
- The practitioner is safely contained within the field of Focusing and within the field the arts. Creative Compassion practise is trauma-informative in terms that the practitioner is revitalised by a profound safe setting. Given a safe environment, curiosity to experiment and try out new things in small doses has the say in every human being.

Creative Compassion practice as an introduction to RE-attitude reveals the Bigger Us. The Bigger is: The art practitioner, their Inner Artist, the professional art piece of reference, the professional artist-within and the Experiential Third (what comes up unexpectedly as gift through artistic relating, artistic expression and embodied experiencing in the given situation).

More about on the Creative Compassion website <https://creativecompassion.eu>

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