



Episode Transcript

Season 2 Episode 6: Empathic Intelligence Pt.2

Intro Hi everyone and welcome to The Big View: Ending Poverty in Your Community. At (Yvette Trujillo) Circles, our mission is building community to end poverty through intentional friendships, personal transformation, and systemic change led by the people closest to the challenge. And our vision for the future is all individuals live in equitable and thriving communities where poverty no longer exists.

Kris Welcome back to Circles Big View. I'm Kris Alexander, the Chief Learning Officer at Circles USA, and I'm joined, as always, by our executive director, Tara Johnson. This is Episode 6, part two of our powerful conversation on empathic intelligence with Meenadchi, somatic healing practitioner and author of Decolonizing Nonviolent Communication. If you haven't listened to part one yet, I encourage you to go back and check it out.

In this episode, we will explore how empathic intelligence supports us in navigating trauma, poverty, systems change, and relational conflict as we read and reflect on key passages from Meenadchi's book and talk about how empathy shows up in our bodies, our relationships, and in the ways we build community. Enjoy.

I would love to read a, just a quick passage from your book, because it was so life changing for me. And you knew it was life changing because you said in the passage you said to like, take a moment to pause and read it again.

But you were talking about trauma and just kind of the fight, flight, freeze and fawn responses, stress responses that we all have. Naturally, our bodies take care of us and protect us in these ways that we don't have control over. And what you said was, "If you survived..." So, if you survived your trauma. "You did do something.

Your body did exactly what it needed to do to carry you through that experience and bring you out alive. And then you said, "If this is new information for you, please take a moment to pause and read it again." Which I did, and I think I read it about five more times. So, "If you survived, you did do something.

Your body did exactly what it needed to do to carry you through that experience and bring you out alive. Whatever you did, you did exactly what you needed to do to make it here alive." And what really just I mean, it hit me in about a hundred different ways, but I think the one that really just kind of like straight to my core was, the experience, my personal, experience of being in poverty as a young, single mom and just all of the

decisions that I made and all of the, ways that I wish I could go back and, like, be a better mother or make different choices or like, be more present for my son or just all of those, or like, even just, you know, money decisions I made or living decisions I made, and then just kind of being like, no, actually, you did it. You kept y'all alive like you did the thing you needed to do. You were doing the best you could, like you were operating in this inherently traumatic experience from a place of being traumatized and that was just so powerful for me to just provide, like past, little young adult me empathy for who I was, the decisions that I was making, how I was showing up.

Meenadchi Yeah.

Kris And just. Yeah, just it was a really profound experience reading that.

Meenadchi Yeah. I'm glad. I'm really glad.

Kris Yeah. And I think if we could remember that for each other, especially in this work, you know, when we're showing up with people who are experiencing poverty or trauma or whatever it is, and we're like, why did you why did you do that? Why? You know, we have trouble understanding cognitively. It's like, okay, but they're doing what they need to do to stay alive and to come out of this as unscathed as possible. And our job isn't to question the decisions. Our job is to just be there and love them and support them through it.

Meenadchi Yeah. One of the things I was thinking about today is that, you know, the word "good" and "bad" decisions is like...

Good you know, who knows what's good, who knows what's bad, right? But all bad decisions are there come from a place of disconnection or they come from a place of desperation. And there's so much like tending that's needed for either. Yeah.

Kamatara Yeah. And that's so much compassion. I mean, that's that empathy right there. When when I see someone's life and I see something that either doesn't make sense to me or I'm aghast at what I'm witnessing, and it's like, wait a minute, you know, that's someone's brother, someone's son, someone's father. Like, or someone's, you know, wife, sister, mother, brother, you know, whatever.

Like all the labels that we put, like that is someone's precious baby. And now, for whatever reason, the thing that we're witnessing, that was the next logical step in that person's life, whatever, whatever that that was. I was formerly a school teacher, and I would take students on a public bus to get to field trips, and then we would see, you know, all different kinds of behavior like you would see in a fabulously large city where where I live and the kids would just be there, you know, snickering and gasping all sort of things, and I'd say, "hold on".

You know, this is someone's, you know, precious baby, all grown up. And for some reason, what we just witnessed. And it makes like what has happened in this person's

life that this is now the thing that is right here. And it's that stack of, of the trauma, of the poverty, of the needs not met, of I mean, of just so many things stacking up.

So again, we're, you know, back to that empathy. And just as much as, you know, we might look at a policymaker who says something or does something that we are just aghast and cannot believe that those words came out or like this bill got passed, which will remain nameless and, you know, it's going to impact millions of people and seems unconscionable.

But then, you know, okay, when I look at this policymaker as a human being and maybe have a real conversation with this particular person and try to understand more. Okay, how can I understand that this is this next step that I'm experiencing right here with this person? So it's, there's a lot of yeah, survival skills and and there's thinking behind it and there's history behind it and there's trauma behind it and fear and lots of things that only happen when we slow down to have that relationship.

Meenadchi Yeah.

Kris Well, and it goes back down, back around, circling back around to the beginning of the conversation where we were talking about slowing down, going against this sense of urgency that we might be experiencing.

Kris And I think you really just hit the nail on the head of why empathy is such an important conversation to have in Systems Change work, because what we're seeing is a lot of just fighting against and making the whole person wrong. And if we can slow down and recognize, and Kazu Haga actually talks about this,

Kris whose another one of my favorite empathy people. And he says, "While it may seem challenging to extend empathy to oppressors, compassion isn't a finite resource, and our capacity to empathize with individuals who have caused harm can bolster our efforts in systems change. Because understanding the full scope of someone's past can shed light on their decisions." And then my most favorite part that I tell people all the time is, "Understanding doesn't equate to condoning or allowing harmful behavior to continue. Instead, deep connection and empathy empower us to have a transformative influence, providing a healing and supporting presence." And, and so just like when you talk about that Kamatara, it's like, yes, can we empathize? Can we recognize that that person made a decision that, however wild or outside of our own values, it is, you know, it is the next, logical step in their experience.

Kris Can we slow down? Can we empathize with them in such a way that we can allow it to be a transformative experience instead of just coming and yelling at them, or with them. Yeah, and Meenadchi, I want to hear any thoughts you just have on this. And I also want to, go into your map of conflict because I feel like this is a really good...

Meenadchi Okay, yeah yeah yeah.

Kris ... space for this. But if you have anything else before that, please, by all means, share.

Meenadchi Yeah, I also love that passage and sentiment. And I think there's a lot of nuance because so much about our ability to hold compassion for someone who's doing something harmful or hurtful, our ability to be curious about why are you doing that in a way that's genuinely curious and not judgmental will, hinges upon our capacity. And someone whose work I referenced often is Deepa Iyer, and I'll share that she has an, she has a book, but she has an infographic that I,

So I'll share that with you. To also kind of go with show notes, but, she talks about how we all have a different role within social change work. Right? So there is someone whose job it is to be the one yelling, there is someone whose job it is to be the disruptors, to say that this needs to stop, this is BS, etc., etc. and then there are others of us whose work it is to be the healers, the weavers, the repairers, the re-connectors.

And so what feels important. And a quote, I'm going to Google it to make sure that I get it correctly. It's from Howard Thurman. And he says, "Do not ask for what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." And so I do think it is incredibly important in change work that we're listening for our own aliveness and moving in that direction, even if that feels antithetical to what everybody else is saying we should be doing, but to letting our own aliveness lead the way we structure collective change.

Yeah.

Kris Well, and that just something that always, I think, can maybe be left out of the nuance of conversation around trauma and oppressors and people who have done harm is this idea that people who have been harmed or experienced trauma should forgive or, you know, empathize with their oppressors and things like that. And so it's also a really good reminder that that's not everyone's job, like you don't have...

Yes, it's important for us to empathize with oppressors. It's not important for every person to do that. And so, you know, just because, empathy is important doesn't mean that it's your personal job to empathize with your oppressor. It's your job to do what's yours to do, and it's somebody's job to empathize with your oppressor in order to have that transformative experience.

So, you know, it just I just always get so nervous in these conversations. Not here with us, because I know none of us want say it, but you know, I just I hear so often, like, oh, well, you should just forgive them or, you know, all of that. And it's like, no, that's actually not necessary to have to do transformative work.

Meenadchi Yeah.

Kris And I love that you brought, we love Howard Thurman around here.

Meenadchi Yes.

Kris Yes. So your map of conflict. I just, I as we were talking, I was like, this, this is what she was talking about in the book! So would you tell us, for people who don't know what that is, would you tell us a little bit about that and just.

Meenadchi Yeah.

Kris Yeah, just explain it?

Meenadchi Yeah.

This is a really basic NVC concept, that we, there's a universal set of human needs. You can also think about them as universal human rights. All of our needs are the same. Like meaning that we all have them, right when they prioritize them to different degrees. But we all have a similar set of needs. And then the place where there's really a big variation is what we do to get our needs met.

And that's a strategy, right? The action we take to get the need met. Very, very concrete. Simple example is if you have, a couple that's in a romantic partnership, you know, both of them have needs for intimacy and for connection and for love. And for one person, that might mean staying in the relationship through thick and thin.

For somebody else, that might mean actually, at a certain point, I need to exit the relationship. And it doesn't mean that I don't want you to have access to love. It doesn't mean I don't want you to have access to intimacy. I just don't want to be the strategy, the container where those needs are getting them right. And that's painful.

That is so painful. We've all had some version of that experience, but it's an example of actually everybody is looking for the same thing. Everybody is looking for the same thing. But the ways in which we think that we can, find it is, is different. And I think that can also be said for a lot of the things that are happening politically, not just in the US, but across the world.

If you ask anybody on any side of the line, they will tell you they're looking for safety. They were they will not tell you that they think. I mean, they're not going to explicitly say, I want to destroy somebody else's way... because that's not that's not really what they're hungry for. Right? They're hungry for is a sense of safety.

And it is incredibly painful that your sense of safety comes from, acts that I've perceived that I feel are like dehumanizing to me, or like stripping away resources that are necessary for my sense of safety. But that's just the math. We're all looking for the same thing, but the way we choose to get it is different.

And that's where conflict happens.

Kris So how how can we utilize that information? Because that felt pretty life changing. You also and I do have to admit, I have some experience with Nonviolent Communication, but I haven't actually made it all the way through Marshall Rosenberg's book. So, I

didn't realize that that was like a nonviolent communication thing, but, how do we utilize that information?

Because that is life changing. Because it's correct. We all want safety, belonging, you know, enough to eat, a way to keep our families safe, to raise our children to be able to thrive, you know, whatever that may look like for us. Right? How do we use this information to support our systems change work and to to communicate that, like, how do we get us on the same page with strategies to, to move the needle in a direction that we can all agree on because we're all we're all looking for the same thing, like the foundation is the same.

Meenadchi Yeah.

So for a systems change perspective, I actually do feel that some degree of, some degree of force is necessary. You know what I mean? I, I think that we can, try to have conversations. I mean, we've been having, this country has been having so many conversations that span, right, how many centuries? Right? And some of those are moving the needle in one direction.

Some things are still staying the same. So I think for really, really big systems change work, some degree of like force is necessary. It will feel painful to one party or another to just kind of like take control and ensure that X, Y or Z things happen. I think that, the place where this kind of concept, has maybe its strongest use is a in interpersonal conflict, in kind of like in the home and in community.

I think in a lot of organizing spaces, people get really, really angry with each other, you know what I mean? And like, there's really, really big ruptures that then destabilize social change work on the ground. And so I think if people can develop the the practice of really listening for the underlying need instead of like going into, like finger pointing and like blame and shame kind of strategy.

I think that, I think that sort of more grassroots organizing work can be more sustainable. And I also think we can have happier relationships at home, because let's be real, when we have like, happier relationship in our families, happier relationships with our partners, happier relationships with our neighbors, it also makes social change work more sustainable and easy to do.

So I think that's the the place where I would say, here's the most immediate place where I see an opportunity for implementation.

Kamatara So it sounds like the key question to ask is: What's the unmet need in in this moment for this person?

Meenadchi Yeah. And it might not always sound like that, because if you talk like that to somebody, they, you know, they might say, stop using that therapy talk on me or whatever, right. But, but certainly when we are listening, we're listening for what's

really important. And the way that that might come out of our mouth might be. Do you, you know, do you know what the unmet need is for you?

Right. Depending upon the rapport and relationship? Or it might be, hey, I get the sense that something I'm doing is pissing you off and like, it's like it's like ruffling your sense of respect. I get the sense that, like, you feel like I don't respect you right now. You know what I mean? There may be different ways that we communicate or ask the question, but what we're listening for is always the same, which is what is the and what is the underlying need?

What's the most important thing?

Kris Yeah.

I have a really, annoying to me because I was the one doing it example that just happened yesterday. And as I was reading through this, I was like, oh my goodness, this is it. So we just bought a new car. And we use a third party, loan, like we used our bank to do the loan.

And so, we asked them, you know, what's the process, yada yada yada. And they said, oh, it'll be about two business days, which would have been Thursday. And we were like, great, can we definitely have it by Friday? I'm going out of town. We need two vehicle, blah blah blah. And they said, yes. That should be no problem. Well, then they didn't communicate.

We called them on Thursday. You know, they were like, oh, we're still waiting. We'll see. You know, everything's just kind of on hold. We didn't get the car over the weekend. We didn't hear from anyone. I was so frustrated. Right. And so yesterday, my, you know, we woke up and I just kind of, like, got myself worked up. I was like, they don't care. They've already gotten their money, you know?

Like, they need the sales, they don't give a crap if it takes us a month to get the car. And they told us we'd have it by Thursday and, you know, like you do. And, and then I called the bank and, and they were like, oh, we sent the money on the third. And I was like, "It's the 7th!"

And so then I called the dealership and I was like, you will give me I, you will find a person to talk to me. And, ended up just kind of, going off and in what would be considered my form of going off, which is really fairly mild in the grand scheme of things, but.

Just like, you know, obviously this person didn't do their job and they didn't care. And I was like, I want you to find out what happened. And he's like, well, that person's on vacation now. And I was like, how convenient!

You know. And, and I hung up, and my spouse was like, wow. I just, whoa. And they, they also did not do a great job of telling me essentially to calm down, because that always works well, to tell women to calm down.

But I ended up being in a meeting when they called back with information. We got to pick up the car yesterday. Everything was fine. So they took the phone call and I could hear them talking, and they were, like, being so nice. And I was like, don't be nice to them, you know?

And when they came back in, they said, you know, what happened was they were trying to do something for us because we had told them we wanted it for for the weekend. That actually wasn't going to be possible. It actually takes five business days. So, you know, and if we had known that, and I explained to him, if we had known that, we would have had no problem because we would have realized that we weren't going to get the car till Monday or Tuesday.

So it was like this unmet expectation and need of like communication and all of this. And then I swear, like 30 minutes later, I sat down to read more of your book, and I was like, oh my.

You know, my need was for communication and like, you know, just being heard and seen and validated and, and my strategy was to like, tell them how wrong they were and my spouse's strategy was to listen.

And like... Just all this stuff. But it was just it was such a tiny example, but it was just so obvious, like everybody was just doing the best they could in that situation. And I'm sure our sales guy, like just his need was to like, support us. And so he said what he thought he'd be able to make possible, you know, just all of the things and how messy it gets, how quickly.

And then, you know, of course, we picked up the car and I was, like, mildly embarrassed, but it was fine.

Kamatara That's such a learning experience, and you get to practice it in the context of a relationship, you know, with your spouse and with your community members and with the, you know, this the book, the beautiful book that you're reading and, you know, and to practice. And that's the cool thing that we have with our community, you know, especially with this is this those chapters, like, we have this beautiful, safe place to practice and to mess up and to make mistakes and have revelations and go, "Oh, and there it is."

And I think it's in Buddhism where they say that, that suffering is basically expectation minus reality, you know, so I have this expectation. It doesn't match reality, I suffer. Whereas, you know what story are we telling in our head, you know, it's, you know, things only have the meaning that we give it. So if we're saying, oh, well, you know, they lied or they just tried to make the sale, they didn't care.

And, as opposed to that salesman really thought they could they could do it that fast. And then realized, oh, you know, so it's yeah, when there's that discrepancy and that's where that really the crazy communication happens or the huge conflict happens. So it is interesting to think about what are what are my needs, what are the strategies to get those needs met.

But then how does that align with the person that's right in front of me, the person that I hope will meet my needs. How do we get that? So we're yeah, communicating. And those needs are getting met even in the midst of conflict. Because I know when, when conflict is high, then there are some wild things that come out of my mouth or strange behaviors that start happening,

I would never do otherwise. And it does get embarrassing. Or it's like, you know, I, you know, I push someone and then they shove me and then I punch them and then they, you know, it just like escalates, escalates, escalates. So it's like, how do we have that pause for grace? I don't know, Meenadchi, if you have some suggestions on like, the heat of conflict and getting needs met and that pressure cooker.

Meenadchi I think sometimes, sometimes it happens. There's nothing wrong with being a dinosaur. You know, they were good dinosaurs sometimes like let it be let you know. And I will also say that as you were starting to tell this story, the, the, the two things that I picked up on was A) the sense of urgency that you and your spouse were coming and then when the salesperson was like, yeah, we can definitely do it.

I was like, oh, I, I bet there's some like conflict avoidance or people pleasing, because just, you know, what I was like as a person who knows how banks work, I'm like, that feels really fast. Like, I don't know if that feels real. That's like a, that's a big promise, you know what I mean? That is a big promise.

And and so, so like, yeah, it's like, and then it also highlights the nature of, like, rupture and repair. We're going to have these mistakes and missteps with each other. And then also the beauty of community is like, you didn't have capacity in that moment to hold kindness, but your spouse did. Your spouse was able to come in at a different place. You were able to have your experience.

Your spouse was able to have that conversation like, we don't have to, we don't have to be on all the time. We don't have to be able to do everything well all the time. We just need willingness to learn and and self-reflect, and then we need enough people around us to help make that process feel meaningful and easy.

Kris Oh, and that just I that just sums up so much the the whole like Circles, right? Because our whole thing is building community to end poverty. And so it, it doesn't have to be a spouse or, you know, like it can be, whoever. But surrounding ourselves with that community that allows us to not always be on, to make those mistakes and then can tell us, hopefully in more appropriate ways than my spouse did yesterday.

Hey, I think you need to pause. That's, you know, it seems like you're really agitated, upset, whatever's going on. Instead of especially if it's coming at us and it gets harder if it's directed at us, you know, to say like, hey, let's both pause. But if there's a larger community, if it's not just you and one other person, and this is why community so important, then there can be that third party that comes in and says like, whoa, hey, you guys love each other, remember?

So like, let's let's just take a pause on this. Let's take those three deep breaths that you talk about in your book, Meenadchi. Let's walk away and come back, you know, and and then... I think the other thing is just I feel like what happens, and I definitely felt this because I, my initial was like, well, you can go pick up the car because I don't even want to see these people because now I'm embarrassed, like, you know.

And to have a community that we can be safe to feel that embarrassment and move like, push through it instead of running away from it. And I feel like that piece is also really difficult. And we don't I don't know that we talk about that like the embarrassment after a rupture.

Yeah. After repair. Yeah. The that, we have to push through to stay together. That's just so important.

Meenadchi Yeah.

Kris Any, anything else that, I mean, gosh, we've covered so many things, and there's, I'm pretty sure that we could, I could continue to ask you questions all night long. I really could. But is there anything else that we need to get to discuss about empathy and systems change and poverty alleviation that just are really important for us to know or for folks to know?

Meenadchi Oh gosh, what a big question.

Kris No pressure.

Meenadchi Yeah. I think just that the most we can do is keep trying. One of the things I've been thinking about recently is this concept of like liberation as an iteration of relationship, like we're just trying. We're just trying. And then we'll try something else and this will work. That won't work, and then we'll try something else again, and this will work and that won't work.

Meenadchi So just to keep trying. Yeah.

Kris Oh can you say that again. Liberation as...

Meenadchi As an iteration of relationship.

Kris That is powerful.

Kamatara And that connects with the hope work that we've been doing, too.

Hope is the belief that things could be better. And that I have the power to make it thus.

Yeah. So it's everything's a pilot. We're trying this. Okay. This part worked, this part didn't. Okay. Next time that one of us gets escalated, we're going to have a protocol in place, like, let's do those three deep breaths. So, if my partner comes up to me and says, wow, I can see you're really upset. Would you like to do some breathing together? That instead of feeling attacked, I can feel supported and then I can reset, realign, remember my values, remember who I am.

Okay, I've got these practices in place. And then, at least in Circles and maybe in the folks listening in on this podcast, you have other places in your, you know, maybe your spiritual community or your community center, your bowling league, like where do you meet with people that's just like beautiful and healthy and your group hub where you can practice these things and lean into each other and support when things get gnarly, like we're gonna, I just love that...

The keep, the keep going. Like just keep trying. Like everything's an iteration and we're always learning and growing and expanding. And it's that conscious evolution piece that we can really be mindful of what's going on and then do better. That's that hopeful piece, to not give up, to not feel like it's futile. Like, wait, I could understand a policymaker who would otherwise curdle my blood?

Wait, what? We want the same things? Oh. We may have some of the same values? Wow, is that even possible? So even just to have any space to practice the compassion, the empathy, the understanding unmet needs, getting in tune with what is my body saying? What words might I put to it to have that space to practice, just seems like the most powerful thing we could possibly do in this very chaotic moment.

Meenadchi Yeah.

Kris I have a friend that says it's a practice, not a perfect.

And so yeah, it really is. It's just the continued, it's it's the cycle of rupture and repair. And that might look different. And it might be big or small or with someone we really love or someone we barely know. And just being willing to continue to come back over and over and over again. And that phrase, liberation as an iteration of relationships.

I just, it just, it brings me into this space of imagination like, yes, absolutely. That is the relationships that we are creating right now are ones of liberation. Like that's the that is the iteration of the world we're in right now, which means there's going to be another one in the future. Like we're going to figure this out and move through it and go to something else in the future.

And that does feel really hopeful in this moment. Which is so beautiful.

Thank you so much. Oh my goodness, Meenadchi, this conversation has been so profound. I have things to go think about after we get done.

Kamatara Yes, I took notes. Yes, I have a lot to think about too.

Kris Yeah. I really appreciate your willingness to be with us today and to talk about this. Like we said in the show notes, there will be links to your book. Also the book of, your friends. I was actually...

Meenadchi Deepa. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Kris Or I say friends I—

Meenadchi Yeah, yeah, I was, I was or she is someone whose work I lean on and I like, like to boost up, yeah.

Kris I'm just like I'm just like, oh my goodness. I, we're all friends.

But I actually found her book today and I was looking through it, and it's incredible.

Meenadchi Super. Good, yeah.

Kris So yeah, I will be introducing that into Circles as well. So you have all of that information in our show notes as well as a link to Meenadchi's book. Definitely get it. It's a, it's a quick read.

However, it will, it's a lot to go through. It's, it's simple but not easy. So, thank you so much. And we will see you all next month on episode [seven] where we will be discussing appreciative inquiry. And thank y'all so much.