



## Episode Transcript

### Season 2 Episode 5: Empathic Intelligence

**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 Alexander** And welcome, everyone! Welcome to Season 2 Episode 5, if you can believe it. And today we are talking about empathic intelligence, which is yet another imperative mindset to doing Big View, systems change work in the poverty arena. So my name is Kris Alexander. I am the Chief Learning Officer at Circles USA, and I am joined, as always with my co-host, Executive Director Kamatara Johnson.

And today, and today we have an extra special guest. We have Meenadchi here and she is a healing practitioner, a TEDx speaker, and the author of Decolonizing Non-Violent Communication, a widely respected guide that reinterprets nonviolent communication through a decolonial, trauma-informed and body-centered lens. She has a background in clinical mental health and a commitment to ancestral healing.

She brings over a decade of facilitation experience to spaces that seek community, center collective care, relational integrity, and embodied communication. I know for myself I got the honor of learning from her at Trauma of Money, which is a really amazing certification program that myself and Addie, our national coach, have been going through. And I just fell in love with her work.

Immediately reached out to have her come on the podcast and then read Decolonizing Nonviolent Communication to prepare, which was also life changing.

So I'm super excited to have you here, Meenadchi. And, just really, really looking forward to this conversation.

**Meenadchi** I'm glad to be here.

**Kris** Thank you. Thank you. So before we begin, there's going to be just before we really dive in, there's going to be like some terms that come up a whole lot that I wanted to just kind of get some definitions and some foundations for us to talk about. So the first thing, let's just start out with empathy. What is empathy?

**Meenadchi** Ooh. Yeah. Yeah. I think about empathy as like, so one, I think about it as like a felt sense, like a kind of that's how I experience it as like a feeling in my body. And I think about it as, like the ability to ride a wave with somebody. I think that some people have the interpretation of empathy as like, I'm feeling what somebody else is feeling.

I'm in somebody else's shoes, and I understand things from their perspective. And I have a slightly different definition. I think about empathy as like the moment when you're turning a radio dial to try and catch the right channel, to try and catch the frequency, and it's like crackly and it's weird. And then you hit that spot and you can, like, hear the music really clearly.

That's what I think of as empathy is like, how do we tune into each other so that we can actually hear the things that the other person is saying? And also the same of, like, how do I tune into my own body so that I actually know what my own feelings and needs are?

**Kris** That's really beautiful. I really love that definition because I think so often, and this is something that kept coming up for me, is we kind of have this idea that empathy is, is like a spiritual ability almost, is how I've heard it described, where it's like you're either empathetic or you're not. And people who are empathetic or empathic don't really have a choice over the matter.

Like, you know, there's a lot of like, oh, I just feel what people are feeling. And so I really appreciate that sort of definition where it's like, first of all, no, it's a skill set that any of us can develop. And a radio is not something that I'm going to like, get myself mixed up into where I forget what is me and what's the radio.

**Kamatara Johnson** I also appreciate that that definition makes it healthier and more sustainable, and that we're, you know, partners on the journey and we're accompanying each other as opposed to what I feel for you, or I'm going to rescue you or save you or fix you or carry all of this for you, because that's a big response for a lot of folks, especially in the caregiving professions will do.

And that's not sustainable. And then it makes a really weird power dynamic. So if we think about empathy more as we're accompanying each other and holding that sacred space and tuning in to each other, that's a much more workable definition of empathy.

**Meenadchi** Yeah. And I think to your point, it's also true that everybody has a different nervous system. So we can pick up on things, you know, differently. Like right now, I'm sure there's things happening in the street outside, like a garbage truck is probably... you know what I mean? But I don't hear those things as much. So I'm not picking up on it as much.

And I think that there are people who have much more sensitive nervous systems. And then because people aren't educated on like, how do I hold boundaries? People just

like absorb a lot of shit. I don't know if I'm allowed to say... they just absorb a lot of gunk. And then and then they say, like, I'm a highly empathic person.

And I agree that that is not healthy. And it doesn't quite match my definition of empathy, because it becomes, then, a debilitating thing as opposed to something that truly enables connection.

**Kris** Already so, so good. I already have so many thoughts and directions I want to go in. I also really like it because, Kamatara, that's so, such a great point that, you know, we're not just because you're, you're experiencing empathy for someone doesn't mean that they, that it's your job to rescue them or that they need rescuing.

Right? That sort of idea of toxic charity. And so and the other idea that kind of comes to mind is if it's a radio frequency that we can tune into, that means it goes both directions. It's not, oh, I'm the empathic person in this relationship, and I'm picking up on you. It's that we're both tuning in.

It's this sort of co-creation type experience. Yeah. Yeah. So in your book, you talk about two components of empathy. Would you kind of go over those with us? And then I wanted to bring in the framework we use, it's like three types of empathy, but it's very, complimentary, very complimentary. So tell will you tell us about your two components of empathy?

**Meenadchi** Yeah. So I think about empathy first as like a somatic thing. And for people who are less familiar with that word, somatic comes from the Greek word soma, which means body. So anything that's happening in the body is a somatic thing, right. So simple example: when you're hungry, that's a somatic experience. Your body is like "I'm hungry". And it's like communicating something.

So I mean, you know that feeling when you just like somebody comes and sits down next to you and you haven't exchanged any words like no one's said anything, but like your body is breathing with a little bit more ease. It means that there's like a quality of connection, like an empathic connection that is happening in the ways our bodies are resonating with each other in frequency.

Again, coming back to that radio thing like we're on the same page, that is incredibly healing. And I think just relaxing. It's very calming. And then once we kind of like, find our way to that place where we just know how to sit and be with each other, then it's like, how do I find the words to describe this experience that I'm having with you?

And, and then using words again to just strengthen and build that bridge of connection.

**Kamatara** I love that. We need to really slow down, to even be aware of what our bodies might be saying in a given moment. So I think that's an interesting challenge, that if that, could I even be aware enough of what's happening in my body, and in relationship to this

other person and like, could I? I don't know, I think a lot of folks aren't trained in that at all, at least for me.

I'll speak for myself like I would have to slow way down and be very self-aware and mindful to even say, oh, I'm breathing different or oh, this is really upsetting, even just being near this, but like to even pay attention to my reaction and then to pause and mindfully put words to it, it's like that is just a different pace that we are not trained in this society to do.

**Meenadchi** I think it is incredibly hard because I think especially just where things are right now, there's like so much urgency in a lot of things. And it's hard to learn when we're in a state of urgency. And these skills, like the pieces... One of the things I always say about anything related to communication, because, you know, most of us know, like, don't yell at somebody when you're angry, you know what I mean? I'm like, that's not necessary. But then life happens and we're screaming unkind things.

Because you have to learn the skill before you need it. And for so many people right now, because of the nature of things that are happening with such urgency and such immediacy, it's hard to justify slowing down. But it is one of the things we have to do because we can't sustainably learn when we're going so fast all the time.

**Kris** Oh. That that kind of reminds me of, the white supremacy culture document and the website of that sense of urgency or that almost, and I don't know that it's completely contrived in this moment, but just that urgency and how it is so, debilitating to us, individually and collectively and to the work that we're trying to accomplish in the world.

And, and so just that reminder that, no, everything feels like it's speeding up. Everything feels like it has to happen right now. There's this really like there's urgency and there is emergency and all of these things. And yet our job is to actually slow down, to be able to meet that in a healthy way. Oh, that just it sounds hard even just talking about it.

But is it. You're right. I mean, that is so imperative. Right.

**Kamatara** It also sounds very healing, like to do the opposite of what... the opposite of this frenzy, which is really the modern act of violence in our society. You know, what would it look like to slow down? How can I possibly have empathy for another human being if my agenda is running them over? I don't even stop to... And we say say at Circles, "People who are heard, feel seen." Like, well I can't even hear another person, let alone see them, if I'm not going to slow, slow down and take that moment. So I just I love this reminder to get into the somatic, get in to the verbal, you know, pause for that moment of grace. And then there's the empathy, like a little container for empathy to happen. That just is blowing me away right now.

Thank you for that.

**Kris** Yeah. And I also, something that I think is really cool that you offer, you not she is in trauma of many of you brought this sort of list of, of just experiences and sensations in our bodies, that we can kind of it's it's like, somatic emotion wheel, almost. Where I can just, I can look and I can be like, oh, I feel, you know, sandpaper-y right now.

And and I know for myself and, you know, I've been practicing somatic work for well over a decade, and there's still so many times where I'm like, I can't, I don't know. I'm feeling a thing and I just don't have words for it, and I don't know what to do with it and all of that. And so, and it's on your website and we will definitely have your website in the show notes, of just being able to look over a list of words and be like, which one of these does resonate with me?

Because that's kind of another part of empathy is the we have to we have to be willing to slow down for ourselves and to actually tune into ourselves enough to then be able to tune in to those around us. So that somatic experience, I think, is just so profound and absolutely not what we're taught at all.

**Meenadchi** Yeah. It's also... So, two things. One same. I also don't know what I'm feeling half the time. So that that's... same, same.

And I think one of the reasons that I like those lists is it's just we forget so many words like I forgot about the word sandpaper-y until you said it just now, you know what I mean? And when we're kids and growing up, we're not given a ton of words to describe our experience. And physiologically, there is something, the body feels relief when we're able to name our experience with accuracy.

So the more words we have in our word bank, the more equipped we are to name our experience. Which means that, the more relaxing everything can be.

**Kris** It kind of it reminds me of this quote that I've heard, which in this instance it's used for people, but I think it actually works really well in this too. It's "label me to see me, unlabel me to know me". And so it's just, it's that reminder that, like the label, the naming of something, the being able to, like, communicate about it...

And Kimberly Crenshaw says this also, if you can't name a problem, you can't see it. If you can't see it, you can't heal it. But it's that like, you know, oh, it doesn't matter. It's just all feelings. But no, it does that labeling that taking time to to communicate with your body like, oh, I see, I see you, I, I recognize this experience is happening.

I'm going to take the time to be able to communicate with myself or whoever or my body. Then at that point it becomes this more expansive experience than just words alone could describe.

**Meenadchi** Yeah, yeah.

**Kris** So, I feel like this, these two components, the somatic and the verbal go really well into kind of the, the three types of empathy that we talk about at Circles. And this is

actually the framework from Ideos Institute who we partnered with for our Big View training and work last year. And I'm still kind of working out how they relate, but I'm sure the three of us will have something to say about it.

So the three types of empathy are cognitive, which is the ability to mentally like, understand what someone is feeling or experiencing. So to be able to look at you and go, oh, it looks like she's feeling sad or whatever it may be. And then affective is that ability kind of what you were talking about, the ability to feel what somebody is feeling.

So I think about more like that tuning in, somatic experience. And then active empathy is the integration of the two. And what Christy Vines, the CEO of Ideos Institute says, is that if you only have cognitive empathy, if you only have that sort of head understanding, then it can be used to manipulate, because you can manipulate somebody's feelings without having the feeling or the experience yourself.

And if you only have the affective, you only feel what people are feeling. Then, like we were talking about a minute ago, you'll get so like wrapped up into somebody else's experience that you're no longer an effective person. And so really, it's that active empathy, the balance of the two. And it almost feels to me that active empathy in that framework is sort of your somatic empathy of this embodied, I just love that, embodied attunement and resonance with somebody else in any given moment.

What do you all think it does that does that resonate?

**Meenadchi** I think for me, I'm a fan of as many different definitions and ideas and concepts as possible. Because I don't actually, I don't know that there's anything that's wrong. And I think that each new idea or concept gives a different person a different way in, and so... And this is like a different thing, but like as, as like a learner or a listener, it is also, I think, equally important to have your own sense of agency, like don't, don't try somebody just because they're on a podcast or don't trust someone just because they have a PhD, like you have to have to also trust your own lived experience, right? Which is a part of the work that Circles centers. And so it is always important to take a concept in and then use discernment to understand, like, how does this concept work for me and where does it fit in my life?

**Kamatara** I love that. I also agree that the more ways we can articulate something, the clear it becomes, because I think when we talk about the cognitive versus the affective, it's like, how do we connect the head and the heart? And then with the somatic and the verbal, it's like it's like the inner and the outer. So it's like taking a holistic approach.

How do we kind of connect the dots of our whole experience here? And sometimes when we're training folks at Circles, we'll say, oh we're functioning on two levels. Because yes, I'm having my own experience of the situation, which could be activating in and of itself and I am serving this other person. We are in a service industry, and I

need to be in a place where I could be empathetic for this person, even as I'm having my own experience.

So there's levels of experience that are going on. So having that holistic approach of being aware of my body and what comes out of my mouth, well, I also need to have what's going on in my head and what's going on in my heart. And it's like trying to do almost like a four dimensional, the four directions here to pull it all together and then have this response.

But boy, that is going to take some practice. Which is why I'm glad we have our beautiful community is and wonderful experiences where we can continue to refine that mindfulness and experience.

**Meenadchi** Yeah.

**Kris** I also love that both of what you said because to me, it removes some of the hierarchy or power dynamics that can sneak into service work or helping other folks where we kind of become attached to being either the helper or the "helpee" like, you know, and oftentimes, I've heard people, maybe not oftentimes, but I have heard people say, you know, that they can't help somebody else because their life is such a mess, or you know, that they have it all together in this area.

So now they can help other people and this sort of, this sort of just kind of breaks all that down because there's no way that anybody has completely mastered the inner and the outer and the upper and the lower and the and the east and the west and the, you know, all of the different things. And so it's like, no, we all get we all have something to give to one another.

We all have something that we need help with at times or all the time, you know. And so it just kind of removes any of those hierarchies or power dynamics of I'm in this role and therefore I have to show up to you in this relationship in this way, because I think it means this thing. And instead we can all just be together.

**Kamatara** Thanks, Kris. I think it comes back to what Meenadchi said about discernment. How to like weave it together and have that discernment because of the experience we're having together.

Yeah, yeah.

**Kris** So this is all empathy. And technically we're talking about empathic intelligence. Which I kind of just when I was thinking about that, I was like, well, it's just the ability to do all of the stuff that we just talked about.

And, and really, I think for me, empathic intelligence kind of goes beyond sort of this understanding of empathy to the practice of it and the awareness that we're going to make mistakes or, or, you know, there's going to be lots of it's going to be a messy process. We're not going to get it right 100% of the time.

We're not going to know what we're doing 100% of the time. And the intelligence of that is to recognize that's part of the process. That's actually good, because it means that we're doing the thing. We aren't just sitting back and talking about the thing. What about for y'all? What's kind of your definition of empathic intelligence?

Now that we've sort of rounded out empathy a little more.

**Meenadchi** Kamatara, do you wanna go first?

**Kamatara** Gosh, I was gonna say the same thing to you. Rock, paper, scissors. For empathic intelligence, I would agree with you, Kris, that if I, if I have empathic intelligence like it is that whole response. I can actively use it, successfully use it, it makes sense. I've got those skills now. It's not just something I know up here. I can engage.

So I have an experience and look back and say, oh, I made it through that, that was grace for that. That was really helpful or that was super powerful. And we had a really meaningful connection in that moment. Wait, what just happened here and look back and say, oh, that was empathic intelligence. I think that's why it's incorporated into my being.

**Meenadchi** Yeah. I don't know that I have the definition of it. I think that I like listening to the thoughts that you two are ideating, and I'm a word nerd. So I just quickly looked up the etymology of intelligence. And it comes I think it has a Latin root, and it's connected to the meaning "to understand".

So then I guess maybe a definition might be like to understand someone or something using, like via empathy. But I don't know if, but I think that's just me kind of like spitballing.

**Kris** I love that, though. It's it's it's kind of it's that it's still the practice of using empathy, right? Like, it's understanding via empathy. Beautiful. All right. So I want to move on. There were so many things we said that I just kept going back to trauma, because trauma is so wrapped up into this conversation, and it's wrapped up into community and connection and belonging and poverty.

And, you know, how we experience the world and all of the things. So, let's just talk a little bit about trauma. And then kind of bring it into this conversation of empathy and also poverty and how it's going to show up in this work that we do. And unlike all of the other ones where I've kind of put my thoughts first, I'd love for y'all to go first.

So, trauma, who would like to begin?

**Meenadchi** I can kick us off with this one. Trauma is, like, such a shit show. And there's all different ways to think about it. There's all different ways to understand it. There's, you know, there are differences between the ways, in which childhood trauma affects the body and the nervous system differently than trauma that is experienced in adulthood. There's the trauma that we experience ourselves. Then there's the vicarious trauma



that we experience when we see a family member going through something, or if we see it on social media or in our community.

And then there's the intergenerational and ancestral stuff that is being handed down to us. I think that one of my very, very favorite geeky science facts is that, I existed in my grandmother's belly, like we all existed, in our grandparents belly, because, when my mother was five months in utero as a fetus, her reproductive system came online, and that was when the eggs were formed.

**Meenadchi** So some cellular aspect of me has existed since, like July of 1953, which is wild to think that I've been absorbing information for that long. And our trauma histories play a huge... they impact our ability to feel our bodies, they impact our sense of worth, and then they impact our ability to ask for things and be in relationship, in community.

**Kris** Yeah.

**Kamatara** You really just just hit some of the key components of, of Circles too. How do we have relationships with each other? How do I speak up for myself? How do I ask for things? How do I have self-worth? They're primordial issues, like tectonic plate level issues. And so we oftentimes talk about we need to do the inner work before we can do the outer work, because there won't be any place for that outer work to, to sit or grow roots

if all this inner, you know, inner turmoil is happening. And oftentimes when, you know, we will see some aberrant behavior or an outrageous conversation or an explosion or something, and we just think, whoa, okay, that's the tip of an iceberg here. There's there's something else that's going on. And typically, you know, it's that trauma response. And we know that the experience of poverty is one of various traumas.

So being really aware of that is is huge when, you know, in this arena. But also I mean just just in life. I don't think we could meet anyone who hasn't experienced trauma at this point in our society.

**Meenadchi** Yeah.

**Kris** Yeah. Well, and that kind of wrapping back around is the reminder that being in poverty, experiencing poverty, whether you're experiencing it as a child, an adult in utero, in your grandmother's uterus, whatever it may be, it is inherently traumatizing. And so recognizing and also recognizing what you said. Kamatara, I forget who said it, but somebody said we don't actually know what a healthy untraumatized human look like because we all have trauma that whether we're aware of it or not, whether we're working on it or not.

And so that, of course, is going to affect everything. It's going to affect how we show up to one another or to our lives, to our finances, to our goals, to our dreams, to our job, to our kids, to everything. And it's just such a big conversation. And I just think so much about because I was kind of one of these people that, you know, I was just so

empathic and I could just feel everything of other people's and, you know, and, and how there would be times that I would just get so overwhelmed, even in the grocery store, that I would have to just leave.

And now looking back on that 15 years later, I'm like, was that empathy or was that a trauma response of having to be so aware of the adults in my life and what they were feeling and experiencing and making sure to meet their needs and this, that, and the other. You know, and so it's, it's so tied together that it's hard to even know, you know, what we're showing up in. And I think that kind of comes back to that whole like the boundaries and the empathy doesn't mean that you lose yourself in somebody else's experience, that that's not healthy.

And it's okay to not do that. It doesn't make you a less empathic or understanding or supportive or loving or whatever word person, just because you are clear and have, sovereignty is the word that you used in your book, Meenadchi, that I just loved. That body sovereignty.