

February, 2017 -- Empathy In Action

This month we are concentrating on a fundamental tool in our toolbox, both as activists and as human beings. That tool is empathy.

For our purposes we can define empathy as “interested caring regarding feelings, values, and/or needs.” This can refer to the needs, etc. of others, and also to those of ourselves.*

The Peace Alliance has traditionally embraced “empathetic communication” skills (aka “Non-Violent Communication) as part of walking our talk when it comes to meeting with Congressional staff about a bill or policy, cooperating with our allies around common efforts, or when facing arguments or differences of opinion in other circumstances.

Here below are three scenarios we will explore on tonight’s call. Our invitation to you is this – especially if you are facing a challenging situation or task, to experiment with looking through the “lens” of values or needs. “What am I needing/valuing?” “What might this other person be needing/valuing?” (and looking for an answer that you might relate to, such as “safety,” “integrity,” or “care” rather than an answer with likely built in judgments like “world domination” or “massive accumulation of wealth”).

Fundamentally this involves giving yourself and/or others the “benefit of the doubt,” and people often do rise (or fall) to meet our assumptions about them

- Scenario One (Kathy’s story) – using an empathetic lens toward yourself. Is there an area of your life where you might wish to explore “what needs of mine are not being met,” or “what am I seeking to fulfill?” Once you have more clarity about your own needs, many strategies might be available towards meeting them.
- Scenario Two (Lori’s story) – using an empathetic lens toward a family member or friend. Is there someone in your life whom you have some difficult feelings or thoughts around? And might it serve you to explore what needs of theirs they might be seeking to fulfill?
- Scenario Three (Kendra’s story/roleplay) – using an empathetic lens in politics for social change. Are you ready to connect with Congressional staff (or more local political or media actors), and make empathy a key tool in your toolbox? (Seeking to stay open to your own values, needs, and feelings, while also seeking to hold space for the legitimate values, needs, and feelings of the person you are speaking with)?

Many people find it helpful to refer to a list of common shared human feelings, and another list of common (or “universal”) values/needs. [Here are two such lists](#), for your consideration and possible use. Thank you for your care in reading this far, and very best wishes.

*[This three and a half minute video](#) does a great job of explaining how empathy can work, and why it is so basic and important for humans.