

## True Empathy

Excerpts from the Workshop held at the  
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### Part V

#### Commentary on the Section "True Empathy" (T-16.I)

**(Paragraph 2 - Sentences 1-2) The clearest proof that empathy as the ego uses it is destructive lies in the fact that it is applied only to certain types of problems and in certain people. These it selects out, and joins with.**

This is one of the clearest ways of understanding the difference between false empathy and true empathy. When we feel sorry for others, our hearts go out to the particular person or the particular group, which is clearly distinguished from other persons or groups. Almost always when we identify with a group that has been unfairly treated or oppressed or a person who is in pain, someone is perceived as the victimizer who has inflicted the pain. We always see the world in terms of good and bad, good guys and bad guys, victims and victimizers. Or we see certain people who are in worse shape than others. For example, our hearts go out to the homeless—that is a group that people target these days—and not to the people who have homes, or not to the people in Washington who make the laws or do not make the laws that allow people to stay homeless. We focus on certain groups. Once we do, it is obvious what we are doing. We are separating, seeing differences, and making judgments, and judgments always involve an attack. That's false empathy. That's how you can always tell when you are listening to the ego and not to the Holy Spirit or Jesus—you will always separate out.

We do the same thing with the body. I have a pain in a particular part of my body, and so I don't pay attention to the rest of my body. If I hurt my left wrist I don't pay attention to the right one. I say it's my left wrist that is sprained or that is broken or that is causing me pain. It is this part of my body that needs attention and not another part of my body. We are doing exactly what the ego wants—we are seeing ourselves as split and fragmented. The source of my pain is not that I stepped on something and sprained my ankle, or that I fell on my wrist and broke it. The source of my pain is the guilt in my mind. It is not just one part of my body that is sick or diseased or in pain. It is everything, because my whole body comes from the thought of guilt in my mind. What we clearly do with our bodies is what we also do with everyone else's body. We feel sorry for a particular part of someone's body, or attracted to a particular part of a person's body. We feel attracted to certain bodies as opposed to other bodies, and certain groups of bodies as opposed to other groups of bodies.

We are not asked to deny our experiences, but we are asked to step back and look at the thought system that has produced such an insane experience, which always sees separation, differences, judgment, and attack. That's false empathy, and there's no joining, because we are joining with particular people who are in particularly painful situations and ignoring other people, as if certain people are better off or worse off than others. That's an example, as I mentioned earlier, of the first law of chaos, that there is a hierarchy of illusions. Once we say there is a hierarchy of illusions we are talking

about ordering, differentiation, separation, and differences, all part of the world of perception. That's why the ego made up a world of perception, which the Course contrasts with *knowledge*, which is a synonym for Heaven.

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The ego always sees differences and makes them real. The Holy Spirit perceives the differences but knows that they are unreal and uses our perception of differences as a way of reminding us that we are all the same. On a practical level, we recognize that our interests are not separate from each other. We are not asked to deny the obvious bodily and psychological differences that exist in the world, but we are asked to begin the process of denying that our interests are separate. The ego teaches that I get home at your expense, because that's the way I left home in the first place—at God's expense. I stole from Him and ran away from Him and made up my own world. It's always kill or be killed; it's one or the other. Like a see-saw, when one goes up, the other goes down.

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False empathy always chooses certain people, certain groups, or certain problems as different from others, and we establish those differences as real and important.

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**(Paragraph 2 - Sentences 6-7) You do not know what empathizing means. Yet of this you may be sure; if you will merely sit quietly by and let the Holy Spirit relate through you, you will empathize with strength, and will gain in strength and not in weakness.**

Here is that important idea that all we have to do is merely sit quietly by. We don't have to do anything. When I find myself getting upset because of your sickness or your pain, and beginning to empathize with your suffering, all I have to do is simply step back and say to Jesus or the Holy Spirit: "Ah, there it is. I'm doing it again, I'm making the error real. I'm denying the power of your mind and the power of my mind to have chosen. Please help me look at it differently." Use whatever words you want. I sit back quietly and let Him tell me what to do. I let Him guide me into what I should experience, rather than telling Him what I should do. A lot of us first define a problem out here in the world, then ask the Holy Spirit what we should do about it. That's an example of bringing the truth to the illusion, or the light to the darkness.

We say to the Holy Spirit: "There's a real problem in the Middle East. Please help me. What should I do about it?" Or, "There's this loved one who has AIDS or cancer and is dying. What should I do about it?" Or, "I have a problem of not having enough money to pay next month's rent or next month's mortgage. What should I do about it?" Or, "I feel sorry for this person and I want to help. What should I do?" Obviously we're not letting the Holy Spirit tell us, because we're telling Him. We're defining the problem. Instead, we should recognize that the problem is not out here in the world or the body. The problem is in the mind that thinks there's a problem in the world or the body. That's why the Course has that important line: "Seek not to change the world, but choose to change your mind about the world" (T-21.ln.1:7).

Let's say I'm close with you and you have a problem, you're in pain, and I want to help you. Instead of asking Jesus what I should do for you, I should ask him what I should do *for me*. I am the one who is sick, because I believe there is a problem here. My mind has to be healed, because I'm tempted to join with your suffering and I want to do something about it here. Rather than drag Jesus down from the mind into the world and have him fix it, I want to come up to where he is, in my mind. He can't help me in the world, because if he could he would be as insane as I am, since there is no world here. Yet we always want to bring him into the world, or bring God or the Holy Spirit into the world, so that they will fix it, which is the height of arrogance. We're the ones who made the world as an attack on God, as a way of showing how much better we can do things. Then when we botch it up, we bring God into it and say, "Please, please fix this."

Instead, we want to recognize what we have done and bring the problem back to the mind, where Jesus is. That's where he helps us. We want to join first with him before we join with another person. We can recognize how easily we fall astray because we always want to join with each other, help people out, and feel sorry for them. We really need to help ourselves out. We're the ones we should feel sorry for, because we have separated from Jesus' love. Rejoining with him allows us to be truly loving and compassionate to others.

It's extremely easy to delude ourselves in this. We all tend to bring the Holy Spirit into the suffering here and have Him fix it. We don't want to ask Jesus how to help other people. That's another red flag signaling that we have fallen into the ego's trap. Whenever we ask Him what we should do for someone, or what should be done for us on the level of the body, the ego has been our companion and not the Holy Spirit. We want to ask for help that we perceive the situation differently, whether it's a perception of somebody else or a perception of ourselves. That's what we pray for. That's what the text means earlier when it says: "The only meaningful prayer is for forgiveness, because those who have been forgiven have everything"

(T-3.V.6:3). Forgiveness means changing our minds—looking past the illusion to the truth.

The holy meeting place is not what I do with you or for you. The holy meeting place is in my mind, where I join with the One, the only One, Who knows what love is, and Who knows what the end of pain is. By joining with Him, I automatically know what to do for you on the level of behavior or form that would be of help. I don't have to ask about it because it will automatically come through me.

That's what later on in the text is meant when it says that our responsibility is only to choose the miracle (T-27.V.1:2-5; T16.II.1:3-5). The extension of the miracle through us is not our responsibility. The same point is made in terms of forgiveness (T-22.VI.9:2-5). Our responsibility is to choose forgiveness. The extension of forgiveness through us is not our responsibility. Our responsibility is not to alleviate people's suffering in the world. Our responsibility is to choose to identify with that love in the mind that is the end of suffering. When we do that we've done our job. That love automatically comes through our minds, and we act and behave in a way that is truly loving. That is true empathy, because I am joined with the Love of God, with the strength of Christ in myself. From that place of love and strength in me I know that you and I are both one. We are not separate. The love and strength in me with which I have identified and joined automatically strengthens you and joins with you, because minds are joined. I've done my part, and my body will automatically do whatever would be deemed most helpful by you and for you.

If there is a problem that you think you have to solve right away, you should close the book at that point and do whatever it is you want to do—because whenever you feel there is a problem that has to be solved right away, you know you're in your ego. You obviously have made time very real and you've made something of the world very urgent. We experience this all the time. But it is possible, even in the midst of that urgency, to take out a split second—that's all it takes—to go back into the mind and say, "Please help me look at this differently," or whatever words you're going to use. But whenever you feel an urgency to do something, you know that's your ego. The ego made up time to have us feel urgent about it.

Someone recently shared an example of what we're saying about the ego's version of empathy. She spoke about her cat who had had surgery, and that when the cat came home, it limped around the house. She said her heart went out to her cat, but after a while she became aware that she herself was feeling vulnerable. She was feeling for her cat exactly what she was feeling for herself.

Now when you feel that kind of ache go through you and feel sorry for someone, you're saying, "What a terrible thing happened to you." But in our example of the cat, it was the cat who chose that. The mind that chose for the cat that it be hurt is the same mind that chose that you feel sorry for it. In other words, it seems to be loving but it's not loving at all.

At the turn of the century, Samuel Butler wrote a satire called "Erehwon," which is "nowhere" spelled backwards. As part of his utopia, he put all sick people in prison. But he also put prisoners in hospitals. So he didn't get the whole thing right, but he got at least part of it: the idea that sick people ought to be in prison because they've done something wrong. Obviously, there is a lot of judgment involved in that, but the point is that people who are sick are as guilty of attack as people who physically attack—people whom we lock up. We're choosing to be sick, seeing ourselves as separate. In back of that, we are subtly attacking other people and blaming them for that, and manipulating them, etc.

This doesn't mean that you don't take care of your sick pet or your sick parent or sick child or sick lover or sick friend or whatever. It simply means that when you have the investment in seeing others as sick and unfairly treated, and your heart goes out to them and you want to take away their pain, you're seeing something that you have put there. This leads into another point, which I was going to get into later, but it fits here appropriately.

If there is no world outside of the mind, which is the basic premise of the Course, everything that we perceive outside comes from inside, just as everything we perceive on the movie screen is nothing more than a projection of the film running through the projector. And if there is nothing outside, then there is nothing that can cause me to feel or think anything. In other words, anything that I feel or believe or think must come from within me, because there is nothing outside me. There is nothing outside my mind that can bring me pleasure; there is nothing outside my mind that can bring me pain. There is nothing outside my mind that can condemn me; there is nothing outside my mind that can save me.

Jesus and the Holy Spirit do not save us. They remind us that the choice to be saved rests within us. Any time I feel something, whether I'm feeling sorry for a sick animal, for a sick world, for a group of people who are suffering, or I'm feeling sorry for myself, or for my own body, I am the one who has put that feeling there. This highlights the importance of recognizing the Course's metaphysical teaching: There is no world. In fact, a passage in the workbook says, "There is no world! This is the central thought the course attempts to teach" (W-pl.132.6:2-3). And Jesus means that literally. Not that there is no world of

cancer or no world of pain or no world of death. He means there is literally no world outside the mind. It's all a projection of a thought.

That's important because it enables me to accept full responsibility for whatever I am feeling. If I witness an awful murder and am horrified and get sick to my stomach, literally, and I turn away and then wake up night after night in nightmares, I am the one who has chosen those feelings. Not that within this dream I am responsible for the murder that I've witnessed, but I am responsible for my reaction to it. The manual says, "Remember that no one can be angry at a fact. It is always an interpretation that gives rise to negative emotions" (M-17.4:1-2). I'm not angry because I've just witnessed a murder; I'm angry at the interpretation I've given it. I am responsible for the interpretation. Metaphysically, I'm responsible for everything, because it's my dream. But on the level of our experience in this world, which is the only thing that we are interested in at the moment, I'm responsible for my reaction to what I perceive.

The reason the owner felt upset about her sick cat had nothing to do with the cat's being in pain. It had to do with her wanting to feel that her cat was a victim. She wanted to believe that suffering and pain were real in the world, and that she was someone who could do something about it. If she did not want to have that feeling she would not have had that feeling. This is extremely important. No one and nothing has the power to put anything inside our minds.

People who felt tortured and were terrified in the concentration camps believed they were not responsible for what they were feeling. They *were* responsible for what they were feeling. Within the world's dream, they may not have been responsible for being in the concentration camp, but they were certainly responsible for their feelings and reactions to it. We can understand this better by considering some first-hand reports of people in the concentration camps who did not feel fury and anger and shame and murderous thoughts and fear. They could be in those camps and feel as much love for the German victimizers as they could for all the seemingly innocent victims.

We are responsible for what we see. That's what that passage in the text is about, that we choose the feelings that we would experience (T-21.II.2:3-5). You then have to ask the question—we'll use the woman and her cat as an example—if her cat were not responsible for her feeling that way, who was? It had to be the woman herself. And why would she choose to make her cat's suffering real and then join with that suffering—which is false empathy? The reason is that her ego wanted to prove that the ego is real, and that the body and victimization are real.

As long as I believe that victimization in the world is real, I'm saying the problem is out here in the world and not in my mind. The ego wants me to see everything that is in my mind, but not to see it *in my mind*, rather to see it outside. Once I believe it is outside, my attention is riveted still further out here. I never go back within, so I never know what the problem really is. And if I don't know what the problem really is, I certainly will never know what the solution is. That's how the ego keeps the love of the Holy Spirit away.

Before her sick cat came home, the woman turned away from the Holy Spirit in her mind, dropped the hand of Jesus, turned towards the ego, and then, as we all do, let a veil of denial fall across her mind, so she forgot what she chose. The experience of feeling identified with the weak and the sick and the suffering now appears to be outside her mind, and she is in no way responsible for it. It becomes clear to her that the reason she is so sad and feels so much pain is not that she turned away from the Holy Spirit, but that there is this sick cat—outside her mind, in the world. But she went looking for that pain first. If

it were not a sick cat, it would have been a sick friend or her own sick body or some situation at work, etc.

That's how the ego does its magic. We first make a decision in the mind to join with the ego instead of with the Holy Spirit, which is to join with separation, sickness, suffering, pain, and death, because that's what the ego thought system is. Then we forget that we have joined with that in our minds. The whole thing is projected outside us, and we join with sickness, separation, suffering, and pain in the body, outside us. We have no idea that we're simply joining with ourselves. It seems to be so real, but that's part of the magic. It's similar to watching a magician who is very skillful. What he does seems so real to us. It actually looks as if he's pulling a rabbit out of a hat or taking something out of his sleeve or sawing a woman in half. We would all swear that's what is happening. In reality it's not happening at all. He is just very clever at manipulating our perception, so that we look here when he's really doing something over there. That's what the ego does. It does something in the mind—it seduces us into joining with it, the "it" being a separated, limited self. Then it quickly causes our perception to go outside the mind to the world, where we join with the sickness, separation, and weakness that is outside us. We then find lots of people who agree with us.

The right-minded way for the woman to have handled the situation with her cat is exactly the way she would have handled a sick child or a sick friend or whatever. You recognize that, if you have a sick pet, that it is something you have chosen, that it is part of your classroom. If you chose it as a classroom, there are two reasons for having chosen it. One is the ego's reason, which would be to teach you about false empathy, to teach you what separation and pain are. The other is the Holy Spirit's reason and His purpose is to teach you that there is no pain and separation outside your own choice. So our friend with the sick cat, being a good *Course in Miracles* student now, says to the Holy Spirit, "Okay, this is a classroom I have chosen; please help me look at it differently." We always have to remain faithful to the classroom that we chose. Part of the classroom of having a pet is to take care of the pet. So she takes care of the pet as any pet owner would. But she now learns that if she's feeling sorry for the cat, the feeling sorry is coming from a choice she is making and has nothing to do with the cat's problem. So then she does what any other owner of the cat would do, but she does it without feeling sorry for the cat, without being guilty about the cat, without joining with the cat's suffering. She would look like any other cat owner. The difference would be that she would feel much more peaceful. It's important to remember that the decision initially was to join with the ego and to drop Jesus' hand. At that point, the cat came along and she could feel sorry for the cat. But if she didn't have a cat, she would have found something else, such as making herself sick, to focus outside the mind.

What she had a need for at that moment, which is a need that we all have once we drop Jesus' hand and take the ego's hand, is to find somebody we can blame for the terrible feeling that we have. When we separate ourselves from the Love of God, that's the worst feeling that anybody could have. In fact, that's the only feeling anybody could ever have. Every feeling we have in this world comes from that. And that's an awful feeling. That's a feeling of being absolutely all alone in the universe, feeling that I'll never, ever get back. I've dropped the hand of God, I've stolen from Him, He's barred me from the Kingdom, and I'll never get back home. That's awful! This whole world becomes an attempt to cover the searing pain of that choice, so that we don't feel it. But it filters through every once in awhile.

We all have the need to choose the ego and then to say: "But I'm not the one who has chosen it; someone else has done it to me." So, at the end of the Adam and Eve story, it's not Adam and Eve who

leave the garden; it's God Who kicks them out. It was not their choice to disobey His will and separate from Him that led to their pain and their alienation; it was this wrathful God Who did it. It's not I who have chosen to be sick; it's some germ that has attacked me. Once I drop Jesus' hand—and this is a choice that we make every instant, either to take the hand of Jesus or to drop it, that's the only choice that we have—my ego need at the moment that I drop his hand is to find somebody I can blame for it. A convenient thing can be the sick cat. If it isn't the cat, it can be a friend, or somebody at work, or myself. It wouldn't matter either. I could turn on the television and see something that causes my heart to go out to the character, and I would feel upset. It would not make a difference.

On the other hand, if I keep the hand of Jesus, I take care of my cat, but I do it totally lovingly and peacefully, without making the error real.