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Introduction

Little Steps, Long Journey

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

—“The Road Not Taken,” Robert Frost (1920)

I have always loved the poem “The Road Not Taken” because it is a reminder that we all face choices in life and that sometimes the best choice is not the easiest one to make. The finest choice leads to multiple opportunities for even more choices, and opportunity for positive change—a chance to reach that place of happiness and contentment where most of us want to be. It all starts with the energy of our initial steps forward. Energy, in this sense, is movement that comes from strong emotions. Young people possess a great deal of this energy, and we can help them use this reservoir in positive ways as they face life’s many challenges.

This is a book about teaching that we all have choices in each moment we share with others. These choices include empathy, compassion, caring, and generosity. At first glance, these choices seem so natural and basic, but in fact they are often missing within relationships in school. Teaching

empathy combines the many dynamics of human interactions such as honoring and not judging others, acting in caring and compassionate ways, and respecting the other person by focusing and listening to him or her.

There is a story told by Robert Fulghum in his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (1988) about a youth group he was working with. On one occasion, Fulghum instructed some 80 children to decide whether they were giants, wizards, or dwarves for a game on forming groups. As Fulghum watched these young people scampering about laughing, screaming, and having a good time with each other, he suddenly felt one little girl tug on his pants leg. He looked down at her and she asked, “Where do the mermaids stand?” Fulghum, in a moment of intuitive brilliance, responded, “The mermaid stands right by the King of the Sea.” At this point, he took hold of the little girl’s hand and there the two of them stood, watching the mad scene of giants, wizards, and dwarves (pp. 83-85).

Fulghum’s response indicated his presence in the moment with that little girl and, more importantly, his presence with his own internal compass that guided him toward the direction of the little girl’s needs. Every day in schools there are millions of students who in some way are asking, “Where do I stand?” Often, students do not ask this question as clearly as the little girl in Fulghum’s story. Instead, these young people are often in need of belonging and acceptance. They are in search of a caring teacher who will invite them into a circle of belonging and acceptance, a teacher who will place them into a ring of safety and offer a firm hand of guidance as the students learn the skills necessary to explore their lives in the future and succeed.

Teaching Empathy reflects the influence of many life experiences I have had professionally as an educator and personally in my relationships with others—including my own children—in my quest to respond to life’s many challenges. Empathy as a guiding principle of life is the core dynamic for emotionally satisfying relationships. By its very nature, empathy also serves as a wellspring of optimism and hope, providing new ways of seeing and reawakened ways of imagining with an awareness of the potential of each moment we share with others.

This book focuses on teaching the pro-social skill of empathy by naming and practicing it, and by modeling and encouraging empathy. It is a book about building a culture of caring in school through empathic acts and by making school a place where each student feels emotionally safe and can see, by example, that a life’s journey is composed of single steps and that he or she can influence the shape of that journey by the small choices made every day.

Teaching Empathy is divided into four sections. Section 1 focuses on how teachers must model empathy and other compassionate behaviors as a primary approach to teaching pro-social skills and building trusting relationships. Section 2 presents specific ways of teaching students the skill of empathy and its companion behaviors: listening, compassion, honor, and generosity. Section 3 highlights strategies for building the empathic culture of a school through what I call the intentions of the school of belonging. Section 4 is a mini-empathy skill-building curriculum that applies many of the ideas, approaches, and processes presented in the first three sections.

A significant part of section 4 is a CD of songs and recitations. I have utilized the universal language of music as a teacher

since my career began. The CD in this resource is the result of thousands of successful lessons. I call the process I present in the curriculum Music/Dialogue (MD). The MD process has helped me facilitate many meaningful and memorable social skills lessons. The enclosed CD and the lessons in section 4 will help you do the same with your students.

By its very nature, empathy is difficult to teach because it straddles the line between cognition (rational thought) and emotion (which is not always rational or easily managed). Empathy as a skill is a multifaceted process that moves along a continuum from observation to thought and finally to feeling and action. Each step must be given its due share of focus in order for the empathy skill to be as natural as when someone says, “excuse me,” “thank you,” “you’re welcome,” “hello” and “goodbye.” These are examples of social skills that are learned by children early in life as expected ways of responding, as habits when interacting with others. It is imperative that educators find emotionally meaningful ways for students to channel their observations and reflections of social situations (thoughts) to caring and compassionate acts (empathy skills). *Teaching Empathy* has been designed to provide the strategies and processes for doing just that.

The Reasons for Teaching Empathy

In 1951, Bob's family moved to a new neighborhood in his home city of Niagara Falls, New York. He was in third grade at the time and his new teacher was not particularly friendly or helpful. He almost failed. By fourth grade, Bob did not like school: it wasn't much fun and he had discovered that the one way he could gain attention was by being the class clown. One day in early October, his teacher Mrs. Arns surprised Bob when she said, "I've been noticing what nice handwriting you have. We're having a class handwriting contest in a couple of weeks. You should enter." That's all Bob needed to hear. Over the next 2 weeks, he practiced his "Palmer Method" handwriting technique every chance he had. Bob won the class contest and went on to win the school-wide contest as well. His handwriting paper and photo appeared in the awards case in the school lobby. This achievement is something Bob still remembers with pride. One day Mrs. Arns gave him a book about a character named Kit Carson and suggested he might like it. He liked it so much that he read it in one night—all 131 pages of it. The next day when Mrs. Arns asked Bob if he had started the book, he told her not only had he had started it but he had finished it, too. She told the entire class about his accomplishment.

When Bob entered fifth grade, his teacher told him that Mrs. Arns had said what a good student he was, particularly in history. Years later, in his first year as a history teacher in the same Niagara Falls school district, Bob sought out Mrs. Arns, who was still teaching. "I won a handwriting contest when I was in your fourth-grade class," he said. "Sit down, young man," Mrs. Arns said. They sat down and Mrs. Arns continued. "I want you

to know that was the only handwriting contest we ever had in our school.” She had created it specifically for Bob.

Bob’s story is also the story of a teacher who practiced empathy as she made caring connections with her students. In order for our students to feel cared for and motivated, we need to intentionally create connecting environments. A connecting environment is nonjudgmental and emotionally safe: a place where the unique story held within each child’s heart is given voice through listening and responsiveness, where each child and his or her story is accepted and honored. When a teacher practices empathy and concentrated focus on the child, each student behavior is seen for what it is: as a form of communication reflecting what needs are met or unmet. When identified in this way, these needs provide a symbolic road map for understanding what helpful path that teacher needs to take. Bob’s roadmap pointed Mrs. Arns in the direction of giving him a reachable goal with an opportunity to succeed and shine.

When a teacher demonstrates love for her work, is consistent and predictable, and is able to see that *little things are truly big things*, she can have a tremendous impact on the future of that child far more than any test score ever will. In this case, not only did Bob become a teacher, but he also became a husband, father of four, a stalwart member of his community, and my friend. He befriended me during my first harried year of teaching (I had his son Greg in my fourth-grade class), and helped steer me in the direction of what I am doing today—working toward the creation of emotionally safe learning environments.

I have been facilitating human relations workshops for faculty, staff, and students in schools since 1984. I often hear concerns from teachers that students are not nice to each other,

that they put each other down, and that they can be mean and cruel. The message “Be nice to others” is not a new concept for students, and it is often met with looks of “Oh, this again” upon delivery. Herein lies our greatest challenge: How can we teach empathy, compassion, caring, and generosity in relevant, meaningful, and memorable ways?

Empathy education is one of the most critical educational issues of our time because it is only when students feel emotionally safe and secure in all areas of the school environment—in the classroom, hallway, or cafeteria; at recess; and on the bus—that they will begin to focus and tap into the unlimited potential that lies within each of them.

Consider how emotionally safe a student might feel after one of the following exchanges:

Teacher: *Did you study?*

Student: *Yes, I did.*

Teacher (with sarcasm): *Oh, I bet.*

Student: *I'm having surgery on my leg this weekend, and I'll be out for 2 weeks. Could you give me the work that I'll miss while I'm out?*

Teacher: *That's not my problem.*

In these examples, the teacher behaved the same way. These stories were shared by parents with other participants during an evening workshop I was facilitating on bullying in school. In each case, the teacher is the one doing the bullying, and it is an antisocial *teacher* behavior that has no place in school just as the antisocial behaviors of students have no place in school.