

Empathy

Understanding, compassion, charity, sensitivity, concern

“You can’t understand another person until you walk a few miles in their moccasins.”

Native American proverb

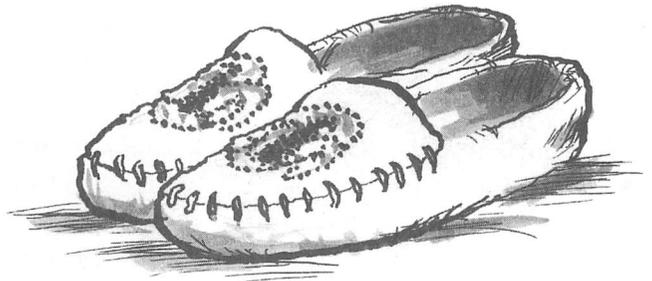
Have you ever visited the Hoh rainforest in the Pacific Northwest? If you travel there, you’ll discover the beautiful Sitka spruce, which grows abundantly in the shade of the forest’s green canopy. There’s something especially interesting about this tree. The young Sitka spruce seedlings have a hard time getting started alone in the dirt. There’s too much competition from dense moss and other aggressive plants that spread a carpet along the forest floor. A seed must land on a fallen Sitka log in order to germinate, then live off the nourishment from the decaying trunk. The dying tree becomes a “nurse log” to new seedlings. The seedlings send roots into and around the log. Eventually the old log disappears, and all that remains are the new Sitkas standing in a colonnade on stilt-like roots.

If you have empathy, you can compare yourself to that nurse log. There’s a deep connection between the decaying tree and the new seedlings that grow from it. Empathy is one step beyond service. You can care for people and serve them without knowing much about their thoughts and feelings.¹ For example, you might have a friend who reads to an elderly woman every week. That’s a great service. But your friend might not know that the woman is weeping inwardly for a lost child, or that he’s afraid of dying.

Empathy means that you can *sense, identify with, and understand* what another person is feeling. You can almost get inside the person’s head and heart. You have a shared communion with him or her. You can connect and relate to what the person needs. For example, if your friend who reads to the elderly woman has empathy for the woman, your friend probably won’t choose to read *The Giving Tree*. Shel Silverstein’s story about a tree that sacrifices its life for a man might be too painful for the woman to bear, and your friend will realize this without being told.

When you shout from a hilltop, sometimes your words come back to you in an echo. You hear the same words you shouted, but they’re not as loud. Empathy is like an echo. You don’t add to what someone feels. You don’t change the feelings. You accept and share them, but in a softer way, because it’s almost impossible to feel with the same intensity of the other person’s firsthand experience.

If you have empathy, you have *compassion* for others. In response, you might show them *charity*—kindness, benevolence, and goodwill. The



See “Caring,” pages 21–27.