

## EMPATHY

John Bradshaw

*Homecoming, pp. 101, 102*

It is crucial for each person to realize that he is there to support and allow the others to *feel the feelings*. The person's job is to be a mirror and echo for one another. This involves statements such as, "I see your lips quivering and I hear your sadness as you cry," or, "I felt anger (or fear or sadness) when you were describing your childhood." You should *never* therapize, offer advice, or try to "fix" the other person. Imagine yourself as a video recorder replaying what you just observed. Analyzing, discussing, and giving advice keep you stuck in your head and out of your feelings. When you discuss and give advice, you take the other person out of his feelings.

Many adult children learned to matter by becoming caretakers. Therefore, they have an *addiction* to fixing and helping. Often they distract the person from his emotions by using statements such as "Look at the bright side," or "Now let's look at your alternatives," Or by asking *why* questions (Why do you think your father drank?). The *best* phrases to use are: "How are you feeling now?" or, "What was that like for you?" or, "If your sadness could speak, what would it say?" these encourage people to express their emotions.

Remember, this is *original pain* work. We often try to take people out of their emotions because our own emotions are unresolved. For example, if you begin sobbing, it may touch my unresolved sadness. *If I can stop you, I don't have to feel my own pain*. But my apparent help in stopping your emotions is *no help at all* for you. Actually it's confusing and crazymaking, and it's probably what happened to you when you were a child. Your comforters, who were purportedly helping you, were actually *keeping you from doing what would help you the most – letting you feel your feelings*.

Helpers are *helping* themselves. Having learned to matter by helping, they overcome their deep sense of powerlessness by helping others.

There *is* a true helping, however. It involves letting other people be *who they are*, letting them have their own feelings and acknowledging those feelings when they are having them. Such acknowledgement can be expressed as: "I see and hear you, and I value you just as you are. I accept and respect your reality."

When you have been brought up in a dysfunctional shame-based family, it is difficult to be there for others in the ways I've described. No one of us will do it perfectly. No group can do it perfectly. When you're aware of being in your own neediness, simply acknowledge that what you're saying to the person is about *you*, not about him.