

Contents

PREFACEix

PART I

Restoring Your Native Language

1. INTRODUCTION.....3
Creating a Conscious Life

2. MY EMPATHIC JOURNEY9
The Difficult Beginnings of Empathy

3. TROUBLED WATERS25
How We Got So Confused

4. IT TAKES A VILLAGE.....39
Surrounding Your Emotions with Support

5. REVIVING YOUR ESSENTIAL NATURE57
Making Room for Your Central Self

6. AVOIDANCE, ADDICTION, AND AWAKENING.....77
Understanding the Need for Distractions

7. UNINTENTIONAL SHAMANS.....91
The Role of Trauma in Soul-Making and Culture-Building

CONTENTS

8. THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN THE RESOLUTION OF TRAUMA	113
Water Will Carry You Home	
9. THE STEADFAST PROMISE.....	123
Why Love Is Not an Emotion	
10. BUILDING YOUR RAFT	125
The Five Empathic Skills	

PART II

Embracing Your Emotions

11. WADING INTO THE WATER.....	161
Awakening All of Your Emotions	
12. ANGER: Protection and Restoration.....	167
Includes Rage, Fury, and the Healing of Trauma	
13. APATHY AND BOREDOM: The Mask for Anger	191
14. GUILT AND SHAME: Restoring Integrity	197
15. HATRED: The Profound Mirror	215
Includes Resentment, Contempt, Disgust, and Shadow Work	
16. FEAR: Intuition and Action.....	235
Includes Anxiety, Worry, and the Healing of Trauma	
17. CONFUSION: The Mask for Fear.....	257
18. JEALOUSY AND ENVY: Relational Radar	263
Includes Greed	
19. PANIC AND TERROR: Frozen Fire	281
Includes Healing from Trauma	
20. SADNESS: Release and Rejuvenation	295
Includes Despair and Despondency	
21. GRIEF: The Deep River of the Soul.....	311
22. DEPRESSION: Ingenious Stagnation	327
Focusing on Situational Depression	

23. SUICIDAL URGES: The Darkness Before Dawn.....	345
24. HAPPINESS: Amusement and Anticipation.....	359
25. CONTENTMENT: Appreciation and Recognition	365
26. JOY: Affinity and Communion.....	369
Includes Exhilaration and Honoring Happiness in Others	
27. STRESS AND RESISTANCE	377
Understanding Emotional Physics	
28. EMOTIONS ARE YOUR NATIVE LANGUAGE	387
The Fine Art of a Life Well Lived	
 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	 393
NOTES	395
FURTHER RESOURCES	399
INDEX.....	405
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	415

PART I

Restoring Your Native Language

Beyond sculptures and symphonies,
beyond great works and masterpieces
is the greater, finer art of creating a conscious life.
Genius appears everywhere,
but never so magnificently
as in a life well lived.

Introduction

Creating a Conscious Life

HOW WOULD IT FEEL to set strong boundaries for yourself while simultaneously building close and healthy relationships? Or to have full-time intuitive knowledge about yourself and your surroundings? What could you accomplish if you had an internal compass that unerringly brought you back to your truest path and your deepest self? Or if you had free access to a constant source of energy, rejuvenation, and certainty?

Each of these abilities lives within you right now; they live within your emotions. With the help of your emotions, you can become self-aware and immensely resourceful in your relationships. If you can learn to focus and work honorably with the incredible information inside each of your feeling states, you can become intimately connected to the source of your intelligence, you can hear the deepest parts of yourself, and you can heal your most profound wounds. If you can learn to see your emotions as tools of your deepest awareness, you'll be able to move forward as a whole and functional person. This should be wonderful news, but our culture's deeply conflicted attitudes about emotions make this rather difficult to accept.

Our current understanding of emotion lags far behind our understanding of nearly every other aspect of life. We can chart the universe and split the atom, but we can't seem to understand or manage our natural emotional reactions to provoking situations. We work with nutrition and exercise to increase our energy, but we ignore the richest source of

energy we possess—our emotions. We are intellectually brilliant, physically resourceful, spiritually imaginative, but emotionally underdeveloped. This is a shame because emotions contain indispensable vitality that can be channeled toward self-knowledge, interpersonal awareness, and profound healing. Unfortunately, we don't treat them as such. Instead, emotions are categorized, celebrated, vilified, repressed, manipulated, humiliated, adored, and ignored. Rarely, if ever, are they *honored*. Rarely, if ever, are they seen as distinct healing forces.

I am an empath, which means that I'm able to read and understand emotions. You're an empath too—we all are—but I'm aware of this skill, and since early childhood I've learned to see and feel emotions as distinct entities, each with its own voice, character, purpose, and use. The emotions are as real and as distinct to me as colors and shades are to a painter.

Empathic skills aren't unusual; they are normal human attributes present in each of us: they are our nonverbal communication skills. Through empathy, we can hear the meaning behind words, decipher the postures people unconsciously adopt, and understand the emotional states of others. The ability to empathize is now thought to reside in special brain cells called mirror neurons. Mirror neurons were first found in the premotor cortex of macaque monkeys in the 1990s, but they were soon discovered in humans as well. Mirror neurons have become an exciting area of research because they help scientists understand how socializing information is transmitted between primates.¹

Empathy makes us sensitive and intuitive, but it is a double-edged sword. Empaths can get right to the center of any issue (they often feel what other people refuse to acknowledge), but in a culture that can't figure out what emotions *are*, let alone how to deal with them, strong empathy is a difficult skill to possess. Empaths certainly feel the emotions that are all around us, but awareness of the healing capacities inside those emotions is rare. This is unfortunate, because it is our emotional sensitivity and agility—our empathy—that helps us move forward, understand deeply, and connect with ourselves, other people, our vision, and our purpose. In fact, research by neurologist Antonio Damasio (see his book *Descartes' Error*) has shown that when the emotional brain centers are disconnected from the rational processing centers (through surgery or brain damage),

patients are unable to make decisions and, in some cases, are unable to understand other people. Verbal skills and pure rationality may be what make us so smart, but it is our emotions and our empathy that make us brilliant, decisive, and compassionate human beings.

Though empathy is a normal human ability, most of us learn to shut it off or dampen it as we acquire verbal language. Most of us learn, by the age of four or five, to hide, squelch, or camouflage our emotions in social situations. We catch on very quickly to the fact that most people are inauthentic with one another—that they lie about their feelings, leave important words unsaid, and trample unheedingly over each other's obvious emotional cues. Learning to speak is often a process of learning *not* to speak the truth and attaining an uncanny level of pretense in most relationships. Every culture and subculture has a different set of unspoken rules about emotions, but all of them require that specific emotions be camouflaged, overused, or ignored. Most children—empaths one and all—eventually learn to shut down their empathic abilities in order to pilot their way through the social world.

In my life, a serious trauma occurred at the age of three that interfered with my ability to shut down my empathic abilities. I was repeatedly molested at that age, and along with myriad other insults to my psyche, I missed the transition into speech as a central communication device. I separated myself from human culture to the extent that I could, and as a result, I did not join in with the emotional socialization that my peers received. Those of us who don't shut down our empathic skills remain awake (often painfully so) to the undercurrents of emotion all around us. This has been my experience.

My search for emotional understanding has been guided and pushed by my position as an empath. Throughout my life I've searched for information about emotions as specific entities and precise messengers from the instinctual self, but what I've found is that emotions are given very little respect. Much of the information we have about emotions tells us to stop the natural flow of the emotions, or place them into simplistic categories (these emotions are good, and those emotions are bad), all of which mirror that early socialization we receive on which emotions are right, wrong, acceptable, and unacceptable. I searched diligently, but there didn't seem to be an approach to emotions that explained them in enlightened or useful ways.

In my teens, my search led me toward spirituality, metaphysics, and energetic healing. In these ideologies, I found some useful tools to help me manage my empathic skills, but still no functional understanding of the emotions. In many spiritualist or metaphysical belief systems, the body and its ills, the world and its upheavals, the mind and its opinions, and the emotions and their pointed needs are treated as stumbling blocks to be overcome, or as interruptions to be transcended. There is a sad rejection of the richness inherent in all of our faculties and all of our aspects, and I've noticed a fragmentation in most metaphysical teachings. I took what assistance I could from those teachings, but in regard to the emotions, there was very little I could use.

For example, healthy anger acts as the honorable sentry or boundary-holder of the psyche, but most information about anger focuses on the unhealthy expressive states of rage and fury, or the repressive states of resentment, apathy, and depression. Sadness offers life-giving fluidity and rejuvenation, but very few people *welcome* sadness. Most people barely tolerate it. Furthermore, depression isn't a single emotion, but a strangely ingenious constellation of factors that erect a vital stop sign in the psyche. Healthy and properly focused fear is our intuition, without which we would be endangered at all times, but this goes directly against accepted beliefs about fear.

I also see quite clearly that happiness and joy can become dangerous if they are trumpeted as the emotions of choice—as the only emotions any of us should ever feel. I've seen so many people whose lives imploded after they disallowed the protection of anger, the intuition of fear, the rejuvenation of sadness, and the ingenuity of depression in order to feel only joy. In short, throughout my life I've found that what we're taught about emotions is not only wrong, it's often dead wrong.

Because I missed that important early passage of turning off my preverbal empathic skills in deference to the verbal skills of emotional subterfuge, I could not afford to listen to those dangerous ideas. I was surrounded by currents of emotion in every moment, and as such, I knew that our accepted beliefs about emotions were nonsensical. I used my anger to separate myself from the cultural conditioning we all receive about emotions because I knew I couldn't survive or flourish within those conditions. I

knew I'd have to find my own way. I also knew I couldn't simply study the emotions intellectually, historically, or psychologically, but that a full-bodied level of research—from the heart, mind, body, and soul—had to be brought to bear on a topic as full-bodied as the emotions. I knew I'd have to become a genius—not at math or physics or anything normally associated with genius, but an *emotional* genius—if I was going to survive as an empath in our mostly nonempathic culture.

This book is the result of my lifelong search for a deep and functional understanding of emotions. Its information and skill set comes not from any particular culture or teaching, but directly from the realm of the emotions themselves. Certainly, I've studied everything I could get my hands on, but I also did something unusual: instead of forcing my language upon the emotions, I listened closely to the emotions and engaged them in an empathic dialogue.

This form of dialogue is not difficult; it's just unusual. Empathic skills allow us to see the world as alive with knowledge and meaning. They help us listen to the meaning underneath words, to understand living things and nature, and to connect emotively with the world around us. Listening to an instrumental piece of music and letting it tell you a story—that's an empathic dialogue. We all know how to do it. I just do it with unusual things like the emotions themselves.

Dialoguing with emotions is not a process in which you name emotions as if they were street signs or manage them as if they were symptoms of disease. This dialogue allows you to dive into all of your emotions in order to understand them at their own deep and primal level; it helps you remove the perceived disability of *having* emotions while it allows you to see your emotions in new and meaningful ways. In short, if you can empathically communicate with your emotions as the specific and brilliant messengers they are, you'll have all the energy and information you need to create a meaningful and conscious life.

Though we've all been trained to categorize and deny our emotions and ignore our empathy, they don't ever go away; they're always available to us. I've found that if we can just pay attention, each of us can access our own empathic skills and access the brilliant information inside each emotion.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

This book is laid out in an empathic way, which means that we begin with an exploration of trouble and difficulty—always knowing that the emotions will help us find our way out of the trouble. When we look at things empathically, we drop down underneath the obvious, behind the merely rational, and beneath the surface of what *seems* to be going on. As we learn to listen to our emotions, this empathic approach is absolutely vital because we've all been socialized to use our emotions in ways that make *other* people feel comfortable. However, we haven't learned to use emotions in ways that work.

The chapters in Part I drop us down, step-by-step, into the trouble we've created by treating the emotions as problems. In these early chapters, we work as healthy emotions do: we name the problem, we drop down to its foundation, we find the brilliance in the problem, and then we come back up to the everyday world with more information, more depth, and more skill.

In Part II, each emotion has its own chapter, message, and practice, but you'll see that Part II continually refers you back to the information in Part I—to chapters on proper judgment, the five elements and the seven intelligences, distractions and addictions, and how trauma affects our ability to interpret our emotions skillfully. The language and the wisdom of the emotions live inside you, but there's a little bit of empathic work to do before you can get underneath the socialization that has separated you from them.

My Empathic Journey

The Difficult Beginnings of Empathy

WILD GIRL

While I was up in the trees listening to the wind
 I heard your mother wish she were childless.
 While I was under the hedge listening to the cat
 I heard my father long for someone, not his wife.
 While I was flat-out on the lawn listening to the clouds
 I heard the neighbors lose their hope.
 Then, when I was racing on my bike, listening to my ears
 I heard the church lie about all of it.
 And you thought I wasn't paying attention.
 Why is it that outsiders always have insight
 But insiders rarely have oversight?

I GREW UP AMONG geniuses and artists in the 1960s. My father was a writer and an amateur inventor, my mother and sister Kimberly were amazingly skilled visual artists, my brothers, Michael and Matthew, were musical composers and trivia kings, my brother Matthew was a math and language prodigy, and my sister Jennifer was a genius at training animals. At that time, society saw genius as a merely intellectual quality, but in the oasis of our home, intellectual, linguistic, musical, mathematical, and artistic genius had equal value. My brothers and sisters and I grew up immersed in art

and wordplay, in math and painting, in trivia and logic, and in movies, music, and comedy. Our family always had a comfortable relationship with the idea of “genius.” Most of us were intellectual geniuses (as measured by the Stanford-Binet IQ test), but through my mother’s influence, we also worked toward artistic genius, musical genius, genius with animals, genius with cooking—you name it. We commandeered the idea of genius and used it wherever and however we liked.

We laughed about my dad’s snoring genius, my mom’s forgetfulness genius, and Jennifer’s genius at making up bizarre new punch lines to jokes we all thought we knew. My brothers invented a silly phrase—“emotional genius”—and it always made us laugh. None of us could envision an emotional person—a sloppy, weeping, raging, fearful person—as a genius. The two words seemed to fight each other in the most ridiculous way, which is why I came back to them throughout my life. Was it possible, I wondered, for people to be as brilliant in their emotional lives as they were in their intellectual and artistic lives? Could people ever learn to move beyond the polarized modes of repression or expression of emotion and into a life-expanding understanding of the function of emotion itself? Questions like these have always fascinated me.

In the third year of my life, everything changed. Along with my younger sister and many of the girls in our neighborhood, I was repeatedly molested by the father of the family that lived across the street. That experience threw me headlong into categories of genius my family would never have wanted to consider and certainly would never have wished upon their toddler daughters. That experience also threw me headlong into the tumultuous realm of fierce emotions and uncontrolled empathy.

(A note for sensitive people: empathy makes me deeply aware of the way words and images affect us. Though I will recount dark moments and I will describe fierce emotions, I won’t relate graphic accounts of the traumas I or others have experienced. I will be very careful with your sensibilities, because there is no reason—there is no excuse—to traumatize you with stories of horror. I will maintain my privacy and respect your dignity by telling my stories in a gentle and nonspecific manner.)

At the time when most children are beginning to back away from their empathic skills in deference to the more accepted (and safer) realm of

spoken language, I was brought into full-body contact with human evil. Instead of moving further away from my nonverbal skills as children normally do, I moved further into them in response to the assaults. The path of my development shifted in startling ways; language (along with many other things) became very troublesome for me. I developed a stutter, forgot simple words, and became mildly dyslexic and very hyperactive. I began to rely on empathy when words failed or when I couldn't understand people, but this reliance created terrible upheavals around and inside me.

Through my empathic ability, I was able to feel what others were feeling, whether they wanted me to or not. I knew when my family members were fighting or lying, even when no one else could tell. I knew when other kids didn't like me, and why. I knew when teachers didn't know their subject matter and when principals didn't like children. I also knew when my molester was on the prowl: I was able to steer clear of him or choose to enter his house so the younger girls wouldn't be attacked that day. I picked up far too much information, but I had no coherent or acceptable way to bring it out into the open. Most people can hardly bear hearing the truth from a close adult friend; almost no one wants to hear the truth from a child. I learned that the hard way. I could sense the real feelings underneath the social masks and react to the truth of whatever situation I witnessed. I would blurt out the true (but unwanted) words, point to the actual situation under the social banter, find the absurdity beneath the seeming normality—in short, I stirred up everything and everyone around me.

Though my family didn't discover the molestation for two long years, they did protect me in some ways. They treated my unusual skills and deficits as valid parts of my individual nature. Though tests and medications were urged, my family shielded me from the further indignities of pharmaceutical and psychological typecasting. (Unlike the present day, when there is tremendous help for abused, learning disabled, and hyperactive children, the 1960s were a wasteland.) With my family's support, I was able to grow as an iconoclastic and unusual child in a family full of outsiders. There, in that realm of art and genius, I was surrounded by music and culture, comedy and drama, and plenty of love. I was able to channel many of my feelings into art or music, I was able to let my imagination soar, and I was able to talk in some measure about the things I saw and felt.

I did try to fit in with the gang of kids in my neighborhood, but I wasn't very skilled at dealing with people. I was too honest and too strange. I always talked about things no one wanted to discuss (like why their parents pretended not to hate each other, or why they lied to our teacher about their homework, or why they wouldn't admit they were crushed when someone insulted them), I had serious control issues, and I had a hair-trigger temper. I ended up spending much of my early childhood with animals because they were easier to be with. I didn't have to hide my empathic skills—I didn't have to pretend not to see or understand my furry friends. Domesticated animals love to be seen and understood, and they love to be in close relationships with people. Most important, animals don't lie about their feelings, so they didn't require me to lie about my own. I didn't need to be in control of my animal friends because they were in control of their own behavior. It was a tremendous relief. I had found my people; it didn't matter that they were clothed in cat or dog suits. I even found a guardian angel.

During the turbulent years of the molestations, my mother would send me out each morning—stuttering and agitated—to play in the front yard, but she didn't yet know that our yard was in direct line of sight to my molester's house. I took to watering the lawn with the fear and nausea I felt when I was in our front yard. I'd grasp the hose tightly, stick out my tongue, bug out my eyes a little, and shake all over as the water poured out and nearly drowned the lawn. My family and other kids would laugh (in fairness, I did look ridiculous), which isolated me even more. After a few days of this, a long-haired tangerine tabby cat named Tommy Tiger poked his nose through our hedge. To the great relief of our lawn, my morning watering ended, and my relationship with Tommy began.

Tommy was an absolute original—wise and self-assured, but willing to be silly; fierce and protective, but infinitely patient and gentle with me. I've known many excellent cats since then, but never anyone like Tommy. He was my protector, my teacher, and my closest friend. He made everything safe; he chased away bad dogs and eased bad memories. Tommy and I curled up on the lawn each morning, and I'd whisper all my secrets—all of them—into his silky orange fur, and because I spent so much time with him, I began to see the world through his eyes. I could