Unraveled

I recognize that I feel powerless. Without claiming too much, I imagine my spouse to feel powerless, too.

February 24, 2019 By Adam Hayden

“I think this is the winter everything unraveled.”

I sent this text to my spouse, early Sunday morning, February 2019, calculating battery time remaining on our family iPad, as the kids huddled on our bed, while the neighborhood lay dormant with a power outage. Thick February skies quieted our home, and a drizzle of late winter rain needled dry, fallen leaves as they leapt from brown grass, animated by gusts of wind.

I took my usual position, leaning against the kitchen counter, near the coffee maker (currently, useless), and I scrolled my Twitter timeline. Social media is one of a few avenues for my peer engagement. My driving restrictions limit my time outside the home, and so, my adult interactions. My spouse and I desire, naively, for ourselves, parts of the lives each other leads. She prefers to stay home with house chores and our kids. I prefer to be in the world of work and errands, engaging peers and colleagues.

Or so each of us thinks, anyway.

The grass-is-greener phenomenon describes our envy. I suspect many working parents or guardians with an at-home partner relate to these emotions. We sell short the feelings of our partners when we project our idealized circumstances onto the other: “if I were in your shoes…” This tendency to imagine the best-case scenario and fault our partners for either complaining about, or failing to recognize, the privileged position in which they hold, may be explained by a failure to listen closely. The daily texts, abbreviated and curt phone calls, the end-of-day exasperation, sighs heavy with frustration, and hyperbolic complaints (“I just can’t do this anymore”) indicate that we feel our voices are not recognized; that we do not feel heard. Quieted.

Empathy is something like the ability to take on the mental states of another person, but too easily do we slip into ourselves, experiencing what the other faces, rather than stretching our imagination to consider how might we feel if we were the other person, replete with their body, feelings, emotions, circumstances, and standpoint, facing those same circumstances. Sympathy describes the former; empathy, the latter. Sympathy is the identification of challenges facing another, and we consider what if we were “in your shoes,” as I mentioned. Empathy requires deeper consideration. We may ask, “what if I were this gender, with this age, with those lived experiences, with these responsibilities, facing this situation. That is empathy. We won’t get it

right. Sympathy is cheap, and empathy requires practice. Cheap and easy often trumps deeply considered and practiced.

Sympathy is extended in virtue of a power dynamic, where the person expressing sympathy assumes they understand what the other person is experiencing and takes license to dole out advice. Empathy reveals vulnerability because it undermines our power. A truly empathetic expression—if one is achievable; see: consideration and practice—reveals that we have limited means to truly imagine our way into the experience of another. We are restricted and biased by our own experiences. We cannot separate completely our unique perspective and position from the perspective of whom we are attempting to relate to empathetically. And so our power, our confident, arrogant, envied, "if I were you" power, must be set to one side. We must admit we are powerless to adopt another's perspective. We are mistaken to think our "if I were you" advice is either helpful or relevant. At best, we practice empathy.

Practicing empathy requires a commitment to listening closely. Like reading the words of a compelling novel, we must give ourselves over to the narrative. We cannot hear the story through our eyes. We must stretch ourselves to becoming that character featuring in the narrative, while admitting our ignorance and powerlessness to achieve this aim. The attention paid to our favorite novels guides the attention we are to pay to our loved ones. Though, in the real life interaction, our imagined character has a voice, speaks back to us, co-creates a shared space for meaning, where the words and events one person selects to construct and share are risk-laden sacrifices because we offer ourselves with no guarantee the stories we tell are interpreted with the intended significance. Our meaning may be lost in the transmission. The author of the novel recognizes this tacitly: the words on the page are open to interpretation. We do not recognize this so easily as speakers in relationship because we rely on the nuance of verbal communication. Still, interpretation features saliently in how we perceive others.

In this way, sacrificing ourselves on the alter of intended meaning is an act of vulnerability. We give away our power to create meaning for ourselves by transmitting our meaning-laden experiences of the world into the shared space of co-creation, between ourselves and another. If I were to generate the confidence to share my feelings, I cannot be certain those feelings are respected with the same reverence for which I hold toward them, in virtue of those being my feelings.

Practicing empathy forces us to pursue an unachievable end, and to admit our powerlessness to embody the experience of another. Even a very close, intimate other. We act vulnerably when we admit we have little license to say confidently, "if I were you." Sharing our experiences is likewise an act of vulnerability. We are powerless to convey the deep, personal meaning of our experiences. And so, interpersonal communication, by virtue of its very nature and aim, is a resignation of power. Those with whom we communicate most intimately, where the stakes are highest, with our loved ones, is where we stand to lose the most. In this shared space lies the recognition of our failure to empathetically relate; in this shared space lies the failure to guarantee the transmission of how we feel. Admitting failure, or admitting our limitations, at any rate, is giving up power.

We often do not recognize this because rather than practice empathy, we slide into sympathy: “Oh, if I were leaving the house each day to go to work I’d have richer interactions with peers and not feel so burned out at home”; “If I were able to be home each day with the kids and stay up on organizing our house, I’d have much less anxiety.” These sympathetic, power-reinforcing dynamics that fool us into thinking we understand the circumstances of another, and so have the warrant to offer advice, protect us from pain because they protect our power. But to connect empathetically, to stretch ourselves beyond sympathy and practice empathy, requires we flatten the power dynamic. Empathy acknowledges that authentic communication seeks for itself vulnerability and humility.

When power is resigned, we open ourselves to pain. We may feel quieted when our voices are not heard. Our power has not been given freely. Our power has been taken from us. Powerless, we seek ways to take punitive action. We hurt and so we look to regain power through threats, angry statements, and nonverbal signals. Avoiding affection, restraining intimacy, limiting authentic communication, seeking emotional relationship with others are actions the vulnerable take to restore the power balance.

“I think this is the winter everything unraveled.”

I recognize that I feel powerless. I do not pretend to speak for my spouse. I’ve claimed in this post that we cannot achieve a fully empathic connection. Though I have not said a goal should not be pursued only in virtue of its far and uncertain reach, even if it is beyond our grasp. In other words, connecting empathetically is a goal worthy of our practice. Without claiming too much, I imagine my spouse to feel powerless, too.

Freely giving up our power, it turns out, is a powerful act. It is an expression of trust, an expression that I can share my feelings and experiences and my partner can be trusted to tease out subtle and nuanced meaning. Freely giving up power is an effective response to feeling our power is taken. Quieted. We affirm, others may affect our powerlessness, but vulnerability is an act we may attend to on our own terms.

I am powerless, vulnerable, and from this place, maybe I am prepared to achieve a greater degree of empathy.

Relationships are built on communication, verbal and otherwise, and each act of communicating is open to interpretation. We hold power foolishly when we imagine with hubris that we know what others are going through, but when we freely give our power to another, when we say, I am worried. I am hurt. I am afraid. When we stop thinking, “if I were in your shoes,” and stretch ourselves to imagine the life-world of another, that vulnerable sacrificing of power just might be the way forward.

This post originally appeared on Glioblastology on February 24, 2019. It is republished with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.