

REVISED AND
UPDATED

*What
Your
Feelings
Are Trying
to Tell You*

The
LANGUAGE
of
EMOTIONS

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Contents

PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION ix

PART I

Restoring Your Native Language

1. INTRODUCTION 1
Creating a Conscious Life
2. MY EMPATHIC JOURNEY 7
The Difficult Beginnings of Hyper-Empathy
3. TROUBLED WATERS 20
How We Got So Confused
4. IT TAKES A VILLAGE 34
Surrounding Your Emotions with Support
5. REVIVING YOUR ELEMENTAL NATURE 50
Making Room for Your Central Self
6. AVOIDANCE, ADDICTION, AND AWAKENING 67
Understanding the Need for Distractions
7. UNINTENTIONAL HEALERS 79
The Role of Trauma in Soul Making
8. THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN THE
RESOLUTION OF TRAUMA 98
Water Will Carry You Home
9. WHY LOVE IS NOT AN EMOTION 107
The Steadfast Promise
10. BUILDING YOUR RAFT 109
The Five Empathic Mindfulness Practices

PART II

Embracing Your Emotions

11. WADING INTO THE WATER 143
Awakening All of Your Emotions

The Anger Family Boundaries, Rules, and Behavioral Guidelines

12. ANGER 151
The Honorable Sentry
13. APATHY AND BOREDOM 173
The Protective Mask for Anger
14. SHAME AND GUILT 181
Restoring Integrity
15. HATRED 200
The Profound Mirror

The Fear Family Instincts, Intuition, and Orienting

16. FEAR 220
Intuition and Action
17. ANXIETY AND WORRY 231
Focus, Motivation, and Completion
18. CONFUSION 244
The Healing Mask for Fear and Anxiety
19. JEALOUSY 251
Relational Radar
20. LONELINESS 260
The Drive for Connection
21. ENVY 264
Interactional Radar
22. PANIC – IMMEDIATE AND FROZEN 274
The Powerful Protector and the Healing Witness

The Sadness Family

Stopping, Letting Go, and Recovering

- 23. SADNESS 294
The Water Bearer
- 24. GRIEF 308
The Deep River of the Soul
- 25. SITUATIONAL DEPRESSION 322
Ingenious Stagnation
- 26. THE SUICIDAL URGE 339
The Darkness Before Dawn

The Happiness Family

Hope, Confidence, and Inspiration

- 27. HAPPINESS 353
Amusement and Possibilities
- 28. CONTENTMENT 360
Appreciation and Recognition
- 29. JOY 368
Affinity and Communion
- 30. STRESS AND RESISTANCE 376
Understanding Emotional Physics
- 31. EMOTIONS ARE YOUR NATIVE LANGUAGE 384
The Fine Art of a Life Well Lived

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 389

APPENDIX 391
Emotional Vocabulary List
Nonspecific Emotion Words

NOTES 398

FURTHER RESOURCES 406

INDEX 410

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 427

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 an endless source of energy, intelligence, and awareness?

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 innate 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 deeply conflicted attitudes about emotions (and the very poor emotional education we receive) make this news difficult to believe.

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 and vital healing forces.

I became able to see emotions that way during a difficult early childhood; I developed hyper-empathic skills as a way to survive extensive trauma and destabilization. My hyper-empathy (which I've since learned to manage), gives me the ability to read and understand emotions at a heightened level. You're empathic too – we all are to one degree or another – but since early childhood, my hyper-empathy has helped me 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 like mine aren't unusual or paranormal; they're 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. But even more than that, I've realized, our empathy encompasses our capacity to understand and engage deeply with *anything*: emotions, ideas, concepts, people, animals, art, drama, literature, plumbing, physics, mathematics, systems . . . you name it. I now call hyper-empathic people *interaction organisms* because they have a deep capacity for interaction and relatedness.

Empathy makes us sensitive, interactive, and intuitive, but it is a double-edged sword. Hyper-empathic people who are tuned in to emotions can get right to the center of many issues (they often feel what other people refuse to acknowledge), but in a species that can't figure out what emotions *are*, let alone how to deal with them, strong empathy is a difficult skill to possess. Hyper-empathic people certainly feel the emotions that are all around us, but awareness of the healing capacities inside those emotions is rare. In fact, most of us are taught to avoid, repress, and even run from emotions. This is tragic, 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, our purpose, and the world. 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 (it's also shared by many animals), most of us learn to shut it off or dampen it as we acquire verbal language.

Most of us learn, by the age of 4 or 5, 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 – 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 – empathic interaction organisms one and all – eventually learn to shut down their keen empathic abilities in order to pilot their way through the social world.

In my life, a serious trauma occurred, beginning at the age of 3, that both increased my need to read people and also interfered with my ability to shut down my empathic abilities. I was repeatedly molested at that age, and along with many other insults to my psyche, I missed the transition into speech as a central communication device. I separated myself from humans 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 a hyper-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 control them, stop their natural flow, or place them into simplistic categories (these emotions are good, and those emotions are bad). 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 hyper-empathic skills, but 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 many 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, anger acts as the honorable sentry or boundary holder of the psyche, but most information about anger focuses on unhealthy expressive behaviors, such as exploding at people, or unhealthy repressive behaviors, such as self-silencing. Sadness offers life-giving fluidity and rejuvenation, but very few people *welcome* sadness. Most people barely tolerate it. Situational depression isn't a disease but a strangely ingenious constellation of factors that erect a vital stop sign in the psyche. And fear is our intuition and our instincts about the present, 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 and hyper-empathic awareness 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 nonsense. I used my anger to set boundaries and 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 – but not at math or physics or anything normally associated with genius. I'd have to become an *emotional* genius if I was going to survive as a hyper-empathic person in the mostly nonempathic culture of the US.

This book is the result of my lifelong search for a deep and functional understanding of emotions. Its information and skill set come 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 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 of our emotions.

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 manage our emotions in ways that make *other people* feel comfortable. However, we mostly haven't learned to engage with our emotions in ways that work.

The chapters in part 1 drop us down, step-by-step, into the trouble we've created by treating the emotions as problems. In these early chapters, we'll work as emotions do: we'll name the problem, drop down to its foundation, find the brilliance in the problem, and then come back up to the everyday world with more information, more depth, and more skill.

In part 2, each emotion has its own chapter, message, and practice, but you'll see that part 2 continually refers you back to the information in part 1 – to chapters on proper judgment, the five elements and the seven intelligences, distractions

and addictions, and the effect of unresolved trauma on our ability to work with 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 Hyper-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; and my brothers, Michael and Matthew, were musical composers and trivia kings. Matthew was also a math and language prodigy, and my sister Jennifer was a genius at training animals. At that time, genius was seen 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 IQ tests), 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 howl with laughter. 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 hyper-empathy.

A note for sensitive people: Empathy makes me deeply aware of the way words and images affect us. Though I will recount painful 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 – for traumatizing 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 and dysnomia (a difficulty with word finding) and dysgraphia (a difficulty with writing, drawing, and typing), and became very hyperactive. I began to rely on hyper-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 2 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 today, when there is some good help for abused and neurodivergent 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 hyper-empathic awareness – I didn't have to pretend not to see or understand my furry friends. Many 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.

A MENTOR CALLED TOMMY TIGER

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 dread, anxiety, 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 feel his full-body experience of lounging on a soft lawn in a puddle of sunshine, I learned exactly where to pet him for the best purrs, and I understood the angry growl that came from the pit of his stomach when he had to guard his territory against the numbskull neighborhood dogs who had no manners. I don't remember when I stopped whispering to Tommy, but soon I was happy just to lie there with him in a silence that was filled with honest emotions. Communicating with him in this way was a massive improvement on (ugh) spoken language.

When I was with Tommy, I had the security and quiet I needed to think about humans and their bizarre behaviors. I'd think about people being terrible, and then an emotional picture would come into my mind to warn me about the danger of not trusting anyone. I'd think about my parents' and siblings' constant, noisy busyness – no one had time for me – and then I'd see fleeting images of their fatigue and despair and anxiety. Lying there with Tommy, I began to learn how to empathize with humans once again. With Tommy's help, I was able to survive that