



Center for **Empathy** in International Affairs

Exchange with Martin Griffiths

Martin Griffiths is a highly respected international mediator and the first Executive Director of the European Institute of Peace (EIP). Martin was founding Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva, and has been involved in mediation efforts in multiple armed conflicts including in Afghanistan, Spain, Turkey, Indonesia (Aceh), Kenya and Syria. He is the only international diplomat who has worked for all three UN Syria Envoys, and was also the civilian head of the UN Observer Mission in Syria in 2012. He is interviewed by Matt Waldman, Director of the Center for Empathy in International Affairs.

Highlights

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What does empathy mean to you?

What it means to me is the effort to understand the primary emotion, motives and character traits of the people who you're dealing with. It's going behind the person that is in front of you. It's realising that someone may come to a meeting worried about his child's efforts at school, with the anxiety that he's going to say something stupid in public and so on. Empathy is connecting with the core of humanity, which for a very long time I've thought of as the defining common ingredient which unites all of us, way beyond culture, colour and ideology and so forth. It's identifying the things that wake us up at four in the morning.

I think that empathizing is both active and passive. Is it at once a very active effort to have a sensitive understanding of somebody, which is based on listening and observing. As such, it is quite an active effort with a specific priority. It doesn't happen by mistake.

Empathizing is also oddly passive, because it's also about letting go of your own ego to allow the other person to be fully there. The thing one finds so difficult, with Americans and Russians is that they are so full on, so dominant and aggressive in stereotypical ways, that it's as if there's no room for anybody else in the room. It's partly passive in that you are allowing other people to come forward. It's really about listening and observing. That is why Kofi Annan is so good at it. As he said, 'don't lose the opportunity to stay silent' or, as he actually put it, 'don't lose the chance to shut up'!

Some in psychological sciences say empathy involves a sharing of feelings. Would you agree?

Diplomatic work, information gathering or intelligence work is all about empathy at its core, and what the best training emphasises is the need to get rid of your ego, to get yourself out of the way. But that doesn't necessarily mean you have to share everything. You have to get the shouting in your head out of the way, so you can listen to what the other is saying, but you don't need to share what they feel. I think it's perfectly possible to build a bridge to a person. But I don't think you have to get down deep and dirty. I think that is to reduce it in some way. Empathy's not about deep bonding, but improving human understanding and communication.

Is there more that could be done to help people empathize? Can people be trained to better empathize?

I am sure we could be trained to do it better. What I think is true is that we are all born with certain character traits and our youth and childhood shapes who we are. Some people are going to find it much more difficult to be empathic – maybe they are insecure or aggressive, for instance. In other words, there are factors in our own make up which would make us more or less prone to empathizing. But you never stop there. Of course you can improve people's ability to do this well.

The most effective sections of diplomatic services prepare for meetings through conducting a rigorous discussion about the interlocutor. So, when you're going to meet somebody you will have talked to your colleagues about who that person is and what their motives, traits and interests are – you'd have a very conscious discussion about that person. Effective diplomats devote a massive amount of time to the study of personality in a way that the rest of us never do. That's one thing – simply, focus – on what's going on with other people. It's about improving our instruments of understanding.

There are also some tricks that are quite important. I always say that if there is one thing you train a mediator in it's understanding body language. There are certain things we need to study relating to behaviour, which reveal what's inside. There is a stream of conscious and self-conscious reflection on what's going on and I think that empathy helps develop the innate skills and capacities to understand what's going on.

Kofi Anan is all about empathy. He used to come out of meetings when he was Secretary-General and ask his staff what had happened in the meeting. He says the first thing you find is that people tell you what they said in the meeting, which is not what you're interested in. They don't tell you about other people in the room. He said he kept on asking his staff 'tell me what happened'. Slowly, of course, we all get better at understanding others. The first step: stop thinking of yourself.

How much do you empathize in your professional life, if so how and when?

I think that it's not possible to run a meeting without empathizing. Even in the smallest, most insignificant fifteen-minute meetings in an office with your colleagues you need to be aware of what people are thinking. It applies equally to board meetings, public panels, mediations overseas – we need to empathize and try to understand what our interlocutors are thinking and what they feel about what's happening.

As far as core professional work is concerned, there are two things that I think are of the greatest importance. One is making sure that any human interaction is empathetic. The other is trying to leave yourself enough space to have ideas, to be as creative as possible. Both require quiet brain power, but both are quite different. If you don't have a modicum of both then I don't think you can lead. Finding people who have a lot of those is pretty rare.

Can you think of examples either in your own professional life where empathy, or the lack of it, made a difference?

One of the things I have focussed on is creating relationship with the 'other', the person who is quite different. That ranges back to dealing with the Khmer Rouge in 1979 on the Thai-Cambodian border, through to UNICEF programming in Pakistan's north-west frontier province. Where it's most important is with people who are most different. You don't use it a lot with the Foreign Office. You do use it with a Khmer Rouge camp commander, the head of ETA, the head of the PKK. I've had very good relations, generally speaking, with those types of people – humour is part of it, as well as timing and respect. You've got to be more respectful of the lower person, who is different. The more they are different, the more they may think they are inferior to you, the more respectful you should be. There are lots of examples of where that approach has worked well for me.

Where it hasn't worked, where I had bad relations, was with Indonesian government negotiators on Aceh – they threw me out of a room once. I didn't get it, and not connecting was very damaging. It was made worse because I got on well with the Acehnese. At the time I remember thinking there's something wrong with them. Actually there was something wrong with me. It was my job to understand them, not the reverse. I had terrible relations with ministers in Mobutu's last government when I was negotiating humanitarian access – I just couldn't connect. Partly it's lack of understanding – such different interests means you may get on badly. But essentially you can get on with people with different interests if you make an effort. It's just being lazy, often, and your laziness translates into negative judgement. You dismiss them out of hand, for being outrageous. Actually you should just work harder.

Are there times when you've practised empathy but it hasn't actually helped?

I'm sure that's true. It depends on what your objective is. In some cases there's a limit to empathy – especially when you run up against issues and interests which are so at odds with each other, empathy cannot overcome that.

You described empathy as something that you use continually. Do you think the utility of empathy is sufficiently acknowledged, at least in conflict resolution and more widely?

No – not at all. I doubt that it's taught – which is why work on empathy is so important. I haven't come across much in my experience suggesting that it is an operational focus. I've worked with many UN diplomats, and rarely was there any internal discussion about the personalities we would engage. We wouldn't go into a meeting employing the instruments of empathy. That's not part of the way the UN operates. It's certainly more frequently used in non-UN work, but is generally speaking not a priority.

If empathy were a more central element of international affairs, we may encounter the question of empathizing with 'evil'. Some would say: 'how can you ask us to empathize with ISIS?' What is your reaction to that kind of critique?

I think this is to misunderstand the difference between empathy and sympathy. We are not trying to sympathize with Assad, for instance, but we need to understand him. Understanding people is not a form of approval, by no means. People make this mistake all the time, and it's a stupid mistake. It's quite extraordinary how people seem to think efforts to understand others are essentially affirmatory activities. Any negotiation is not usually between allies; it is usually between enemies or competitors. Understanding your enemy is essential.

It's interesting on Syria, for the last three or four years, there's been no real assessment of Assad's character or personality. It hasn't been at heart of our thinking: what will make Assad do certain things. In particular, this is a reflection of the international system's affection for diplomacy and international relations based on interests. So, for example if you talk to one of my colleagues in the US, for him it's all about diplomacy: Assad will do what Russia tells him to do. Well, it isn't. At a certain point, Assad will do what he wants.

The mediator or political thinker who places an overemphasis on interests, diplomacy and negotiation misses an extraordinarily important part of the puzzle, and in doing that they are reducing the chances of peace. So, actually, it's deeply negligent. I would say very forcefully to those who do this, if you don't prioritize an understanding of your friends, enemies or people you don't yet even know – if you don't try to emphasize – then frankly you have failed to give it your best shot.

You're suggesting that we have lost sight of elementary precepts of strategy – especially knowing your enemy – why do you think that is?

Society generally treats psychology as a dirty little subject. Just like depression is a subject that you should keep to yourself. Psychology is too soft. There is a sense that an emphasis or focus on understanding the degree to which personality defines things is a bit juvenile: 'that's fine at school but we're in adult world now; we don't behave like that' – as if that's true. 'Let's just do something serious', which means dealing with interests.

This is not helped by the dominant themes of the prevailing school of negotiation and negotiation theory, which is all about interests. As a colleague with a background in

psychology and a lot of experience of the Northern Ireland conflict said to me the other day, 'they just don't get it. It's not all about interests. It's about the chaos that's inside the heads of people in the middle of conflict.'

Reinforcing this is the approach of some of my English colleagues, famously uncomfortable with emotions. Their approach to conflict resolution is about power talking to power to sort it out. They will tell you, 'I'm in the business of getting one leader to talk to another to sort things out.' It is partly a cultural thing; the dominant culture of international politics does not allow for this 'ridiculous sentimental stuff'.

Feelings have an extraordinary capacity to keep themselves outside management control. They are the essential anarchy of the human spirit. So we are not in favour of dealing with them. In its extreme form, this anti-sentimentalism helps to explain the stigma around acknowledging depression or mental illness. It's a wide fight that's needed – to bring humanity and its difference back into the frame.

Building on what you say, it seems as if we need society to recognise that emotions are still with us and affect us when we are adults?

I totally agree. We think of maturing as essentially an internal management process. We begin with the inability to communicate, and bumping into things, and only managing the world with the help of your parents; and end up at the other end as fully capable products. We have put away childish things; everything associated with childhood is put away. But adulthood is not the reverse of childhood – not at all. In fact, as I see from my own son, it's so much easier for children to speak about their emotions. But I think this is changing. The private sector is probably way ahead of public sector.

There are several explanations as to why empathy hasn't been embraced in international affairs; one is the fear of 'going native'. Is this a serious concern?

It is a risk. It's the cliché, which is true: 'first thing, know thyself'. If you don't have a certain sense of yourself and your own identity, and a certain security about it, you're going to be more vulnerable to the personality and character of the person across the table. That personality could be a bit more overwhelming. I've done it; I've failed that test quite often and it's not a good thing, because you've lost yourself. In so doing, you probably become more understanding of the person across the table; but I'm not sure you become more professionally effective. It's not a bad thing if it's a loving partnership and relationship but maybe not so useful if it's a peace process. I've seen one or two colleagues do this quite a lot – become biased in favour the people they work with – and it's not a good thing.

But, as we see with some of our Syrian interlocutors, there's a difference between going native and having a clear understanding; and that requires you to approach, in this case their Islamism, with a completely open mind. I think that's different from going native and becoming Islamist. You approach it with an open mind, without prejudice and without the burden of judging.

That brings us to the issue of biases. Do you think empathy has any role in mitigating the biases of decision-makers?

Yes – I think so. I think if we enter into a relationship with an Islamist or whomever, in which our essential motive is judgement, which is of course on the basis of our own values and experience as all judgements must be – if our aim is judgment and not understanding, then we are not going to understand, we are going to judge. It's a completely different process.

For somebody in our position, as a mediator, for whom the priority is ninety per cent understanding and ten per cent relationship then judging is simply inappropriate and gets in the way. It's a blocker.

We need to train ourselves out of judging. The instinct of lots and lots of people is judgment: they're always saying, 'oh no that's not true' or 'I don't agree with that'. You have to be trained out of it. It's partly an ego problem. You have to be taught that judging isn't always useful. And this is incredibly difficult for a lot of people, because we teach our children not to co-exist but to win. Exams are about winning. Our kids' lives are driven by grades. We do not reward understanding over judgement.

I think I've probably gone a bit astray – having been able to come out of meeting with Assad without much in mind about the ghastly things he has done. So there's a limit to how far we should go. But that's not the priority at the moment. We need try to get judgement out of the way.

Judgement is part of how American decision-makers approach problems, especially because of the strong sense of their values. They might be horrified to hear you say we shouldn't judge. Do you think there's a way of bringing them closer to your perspective?

Yes - they would see it as bad and naïve. I think it's instrumental. Recall that somebody like [General] McChrystal, who God knows is no softy, is talking about the need for understanding and says empathy is fundamental to military victory. It's a bit like the requirement made of US forces by top commanders to stop killing civilians, because every civilian you kill creates more problems. What we're saying to the American policy-maker is of course you have to judge, but you've got to stop your personality getting in the way of success. Success is America's primary value. What you say is there are times to judge and times to understand. Let's be very clear about when we're doing what.

It is not about saying the world is relativist, which is a dangerous thing, and construed these days as giving in to terror – it's not that. If you want to succeed as counter-terrorist official, you damn well know that first of all you have to understand the terrorist. That is essential. What you're trying to do is make the brand of empathy come across as pretty hard-nosed. Empathy isn't the soft option; this is tough, difficult, necessary stuff.

Are there cases you can think of in recent history where empathy has made a positive difference?

I think that at the end of the Kenya mediation when Anan brought the principals together to rescue the process from the aggressive approach of their negotiators, they went beyond themselves – they achieved an agreement which went beyond their interests. *[This mediation took place in January 2008 after violence connected with the Kenyan Presidential elections caused the deaths of over 500 people.]*

It was a really good example of empathy making a difference; a very vivid, clear example. I was working in Kofi's office at that time and I wrote all the agreements. It was astonishing, I remember the announcement, when they came out and told the world what they had agreed and their supporters were aghast, seeing it as a betrayal of their interests. So there are examples but there are precious few.

Annan studied the Kenyan leaders very closely. He had very good intelligence on them and on what was going on behind the scenes. He got them to commit to a Kenyan legacy, the notion that the Kenyan people were more important than them. He inspired them to be a

group, a connected leadership, which would save the country from crisis, and they would say they have made compromises for sake of peace. It was a very emotional, African moment. There was a sense that we Africans will make the best for our people, and Kofi really channelled that. It was a breakthrough. And remarkably, he knew that was what he was going to have to do. He engineered a breakdown in the negotiations the day before. I was watching it and said to him, 'you did that deliberately didn't you?' He said yes. He'd thought it through; it wasn't casual. It was amazing to watch. If only he could have done that on Syria.

In a sense, great religious figures are extraordinary stories of the power of empathy and sympathy. The Christ story is an amazing parable of the power of empathy; Christ's relationship with Pharisees and Pontius Pilate, but you can't cite that these days.

We know, instinctively, and it is commonly understood, that if leaders can make a connection with each other they will take us beyond our horizons. We know this to be true. One of the reasons for the failure of my process on Aceh was because we couldn't get the leaders to connect.

Does empathy have a role in galvanizing a response to suffering, for example Europe's response to Syrian refugees?

Yes – it is incredibly useful and necessary in any good society, and we must foster it as a primary objective. With regard to Syrian refugees, we've had lot of leaders saying exactly the right thing: Angela Merkel, for instance, and Obama has criticised American states that are not open to refugees. This is very good public leadership, which relies on intuitive empathy; it's part of inspirational leadership.

Martin Griffiths, thank you for your time and for taking part in a CEIA Exchange.