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Empathy, Empaths and HSPs – What Does it All Mean?

Amy Wilson

An empath and social innovator who served in both the Obama and Trump administrations, Amy Wilson has an inside view of how change most successfully occurs. She served from 2015 to 2018, for the White House under two administrations. She started in the Obama administration and was appointed as an entrepreneur in residence for them. She eventually became the Director of innovation.gov, and created a movement of change called the Better Government Movement in the federal government. Combined with her being an empath and highly sensitive person (HSP), she has written a book that blends empathy and innovation to take change to the next level.

Sympathy is the feeling that makes you feel like you're lesser than the person for whom sympathy is felt. Empathy brings connection. Empathy builds this belief that I'm here with you rather than for you. Empathy is essentially this feeling that you are feeling a feeling with somebody as if you're feeling it yourself. They find that people who are empaths have this thing they call a mirror neuron system. So, they have these neurons that, as humans, we want to connect with other people.

People who are empaths have a more enhanced mirror neuron system. They want to connect, and they actually can't stop connecting. They're very present with them. Being a highly sensitive person is like having a world of technicolor. It's like when you walk out when you're in *The Wizard of Oz*, you go from being black and white, and everything is bright around you.

That has been Amy's experience in a lot of ways. She feels things differently, and she feel things very deeply, sometimes. But that is something that she's had to learn to harness and understand herself a lot more as she's done this work and her own internal work, too.

- How can you turn your life's difficulties into a vision for social change?
- What does innovation really mean?
- How can empathy initiate change?

- How can reaching out on your social network help you find people to interview for a book?
- How can writing a book become a journey of self-discovery?

Patricia: Hi. This is Pat Iyer with *Writing to Get Business* Podcast. Amy Wilson is with me today. We met through a mutual joint venture organization. Amy and I have been chatting about her book, which is launching this week. So, this is a happy birthday week to Amy, with the fruits of all of her effort, her editing, and her writing have come together now this week. Amy, welcome to the show.

Amy: Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Patricia: Amy, let's start, first of all, with what is the title of your book? What is it about?

Amy: The title of my book is called *Empathy for Change, How to Create A More Understanding World*. Essentially, I'm bringing two pieces of who I am into this book and the work that I've done in my career. So first of all, is the empathy side. Empathy is my biggest strength. I'm an empath, and I'm also a highly sensitive person, which is a way that all the senses that I have are heightened. I see things in different ways than other people do.

My career has been a lot about building empathy and consulting in other circumstances as well. On the other side is change and innovation. So, I've sat in this place as a director of innovation in many circumstances in the private sector, worked at Booz Allen Hamilton, the management consulting firm, and designed what we call the *Building a Culture of Innovation Movement*. Then I served, from 2015 to 2018, for the White House under two administrations. So, I started in the Obama administration. I got to be an entrepreneur in residence for them. I eventually became the Director of innovation.gov and created a movement of change called the Better Government Movement in the federal government.

About 5,000 people joined that. So, I'm a change maker, I'm embracing that, but I'm also kind of taking the lessons that I've learned from building major movements in government, in the private sector,

and even in the nonprofit sector, and bringing it into the work that I do.

Patricia: I want to pull that apart a little bit, if you would allow me.

Amy: Of course, yeah, let's go.

Patricia: First of all, you said you were an empath and a highly sensitive person. Are those the same thing?

Amy: They're actually there's a slight difference between the two of them. And I'm glad you asked, because I put this in context in one of my chapters, because I do the background of this. In a way, some people are predisposed to doing different things. There's a big difference between being an empath and being empathetic. Empathy is essentially this feeling that you are feeling a feeling with somebody as if you're feeling it yourself. They find that people who are empaths have this thing they call a mirror neuron system. So, we have these neurons that, as humans, we want to connect with other people.

People who are empaths have a more enhanced mirror neuron system. They want to connect, and they actually can't stop connecting. They're very present with them. It's very inherent, but empathy is actually something that research has shown is a choice that people make, and it's also a learned trait. So, empathy is my biggest strength, because I grew up in a lot of really interesting circumstances that led me to have empathy, but at the same time, you can learn it and you can grow it.

Patricia: I'm thinking about those pictures, and it may be something that I saw or read, maybe it was on the emotional intelligence readings that I did. You could take a class of kids in kindergarten, and one girl falls down and skins her knee. And the girl next to her is crying, because her friend is crying. But then the girl on the other part of the room is looking at that saying, "What's the big deal? It's not my knees. So why would I cry?" Is the girl who's crying for her friend, is that person an empath, or is that a person who feels empathy?

Amy: Yeah, so the person who's crying when her friend has skinned her knee would be an empath. So that's when they're like, "Oh, man, I feel that for you." Empathy is feeling with somebody and not for someone. So, if you're on the other side of the room, and you're not even saying,

“That's not me. That's not my problem;” that is, you're not even showing empathy. That is not even showing sympathy.

Sympathy is the feeling for, and then that makes you feel like you're lesser than the person for whom sympathy is felt. Empathy brings connection. Empathy builds this belief that I'm here with you rather than for you. That's the difference between that kind of scenario you showed me there.

Patricia: Very good. I appreciate that clarification.

Amy: Of course, yeah.

Patricia: And then the highly sensitive personality part. How does that fit in? What does that mean?

Amy: HSPs or highly sensitive people is a term that was created in the nineties by Dr. Elaine Aron. It's interesting, I was born in the eighties, so I really had a hard time, because I could see that like loud noises really affect me, really bright light really affects me, going on rollercoasters is like, can you just imagine, like if you're highly sensitive, all of these feelings. I once went to a rollercoaster and I was in shock after I did the rollercoaster, because my entire body just didn't know what to do with itself.

And I like to say that being a highly sensitive person is like having a world of technicolor. It's like when you walk out when you're in *The Wizard of Oz*, you go from being black and white, and everything is bright around you. That has been my experience in a lot of ways. I feel things differently, and I feel things very deeply, sometimes. But that is something that I've had to learn to harness and understand myself a lot more as I've done this, and as I've done this work and did my own internal work, too.

Patricia: When you talk about a rollercoaster, it makes me think of a trip I took on a rollercoaster with my son when he was probably about, I would guess he was probably five. We went on the Magic Mountain rollercoaster in Disney World or Disneyland, one of the two. And it's a rollercoaster in the dark with lots of noise, and flashing, and very disorienting.

I also consider myself to be a highly sensitive person. And what I remember is that partway through the rollercoaster, the force of the centrifugal force threw him against me. The back of his head hit my face and drove my glasses into my nose, which is always a sensation, if you wear glasses, that you would not want to replicate. And I remember coming off of that rollercoaster thinking, “That was the longest ride I have ever had in my life.” It may have lasted five minutes or 10 minutes at the most, but it was so distressing if you're sensitive to the kinds of stimuli that are present on a rollercoaster in the dark. So, for anyone listening who considers themselves an HSP, don't do the rollercoaster in the dark deal.

Amy: Yes. And there's a lot of other things you shouldn't do, too. But we can talk more about that later.

Patricia: You have all this experience in the area of empathy and innovation. Tell our listener how you pull this all together to come up with the idea for your book. And first of all, is this your first book, the one that's being born this week?

Amy: Yes. And I love how you say birthed, like this birthing. Because I want to say that it's like I'm birthing this thing, as I don't have any children myself, but I was like, this is one of the things I'm building and it's a toddler now, and now I'm like putting it on the world. I'm birthing this thing. So, I love that. This is my first book.

But in my past experience, I've written a lot of things for the White House, like things for the impact of open data in the Obama White House. At Booz Allen, I wrote the Innovation Playbook. This asked, “What are the ways that we're going to spread this kind of innovative culture across the entire firm at Booz Allen.” As a Presidential Innovation fellow, that entrepreneur in residence in the White House, and the Director of innovation.gov, we wrote a bunch of different research that's out there as well. And also, on innovation.gov, we had a toolkit, and a playbook, and a lot of other things. And I'm also a technology policy fellow. I wear many different hats, as you can imagine, Technology Policy fellow with the Aspen Institute. It's being like a policy entrepreneur as well. So, you think about how do we tackle policy in new and inventive ways to solve some of our biggest challenges in the world? So, I got the question about like, okay, this is a new book. The other part of the question, can you remember?

Patricia: Yes, what led you to decide to write the book?

Amy: Yeah, yeah. So, a couple things. So, I, being an empath, having empathy, I realized that in the world, there is not a ton of empathy. There are a lot of dysfunctional workplaces, a lot of dysfunction that's happening in our culture and society today, things like capitalism, and narcissism that shows up in our leaders.

And one thing in particular which was a catalyst for me to go on a personal journey of self-exploration was when I was working in the most recent administration at the White House, I was having a lot of difficulty kind of understanding the vision of what the Office of American Innovation wanted to do. I had created innovation.gov and this movement. It was a very big grassroots movement. But then what they wanted to do was to kind of turn this into having deeper impact of going into an agency and the federal government and being able to transform the agency from the top down, or from the bottom up.

But my philosophy was open, participatory, and peer driven. So, it's like more bottom up, it's like culture happens because of a movement and not a mandate. And that's a lot of the work that I did. But also, when I went into that administration, it really showed that they believed in a different value system, completely. I kind of knew that deep down inside, but I went into a meeting, trying to understand what their vision was in that meeting. And I was stepping into this new role, like I said, to create like a repeatable plan for 21st century government and go into agencies and to transform them from the ground up.

And I was called the Center of Excellence around transformation. And in that role, I was starting to create shared language of innovation for new organizations. So, I go into this meeting with the people from the Office of American Innovation. And in that meeting, they stop me mid-sentence when I'm trying to talk and they say, "You know what, you're thinking about everything wrong. You need to think about how you fit into what we're doing."

And I was I'm sitting here and there's a ton of people who are standing behind me that are lots of public servants that are here that believe in what we're doing. And yet this person at the top is essentially

squashing this belief. And then by the end of that meeting, they said, “You work for me, and you work for this president.”

So, for me, that was a whole kind of world that opened up to me. After that meeting occurred, I ended up getting fired from my position. Innovation.gov was taken down in retaliation. And then, finally, I was told I could never convene The Better Government Movement again. And so professionally, it was hard. Personally, it was hard. It was really, really a difficult time.

I decided, after that time, to take a sabbatical. And in the middle of that sabbatical, all that happened in 2018. In 2019, I decided to take this time to recover, to understand what happened, and that is what led that journey, led me to write this book, in the middle of 2019. So, I started it then. And then I finished editing the book during the pandemic, which was completely cathartic for me, because I just needed to get my thoughts down on paper. So, kind of see what’s happening in the world.

Patricia: And did you find another position in the public sector, or the governmental sector, or the private sector in the year 2020?

Amy: Yeah. In 2020, I ended up working mostly as a technology policy fellow in the Aspen Institute. So, in a way, I was working with Aspen and doing a project for the first three months of the year. I usually live in Washington, DC, but I was in San Francisco. So, I moved to San Francisco on New Year's Eve of 2019. And to bring in the new year, unbeknownst to us, we didn't know a pandemic was coming. So, I was in San Francisco for the first three months of 2020 to do the in-person component of my fellowship. And then when I came back to the east coast, where I live, I was finishing up the Aspen program, and then I finished writing my book in 2020.

Patricia: All right.

Amy: Yeah.

Patricia: I understand, from talking with you before we began recording, that you did some interviews with people to create the content for the book. Can you tell our listener what that process was like? How did you select the people? How did that interviewing process work out for you?

Amy: At the time, when I decided to write this book, I was saying, okay, I realize that I want to create a more empathetic world. And I wanted to create a more empathetic world, and I wanted to get people who were leading change through empathy. I just put it out on my social network. And I said, “You know what, I'm starting this journey of writing a book. And so, I'm really curious, who do you think, in your world, has the most empathy? And who's leading change?” And I started also defining for me, what that means, right? What does empathy and change, what does that intersection mean? So, I had a couple of people in my life that I knew I wanted to do. But the vast majority of people who showed up in this were just people that I had found through that experience, that journey of reaching out to my colleagues and the people that I knew on social media.

Patricia: As you talk about the concept of empathy and change, it makes me think of how different the results are of change, if you factor in empathy, and you help people, and involve people, and listen to them, and ask their opinions. versus if you don't have empathy, and you say, “This is the way it's going to be done.” I'm pointing at the camera, if you're watching this on video, if you're listening to it. This is the way it's being done. I'm pointing at Amy's head, and Amy is pulling back a little bit instinctively like, “I don't think so.”

Amy: Yeah, yeah.

Patricia: Yeah, you can try that, but I'm not going along with that.

Amy: Yeah.

Patricia: Can you share some insights about how you linked these concepts together? And what are the outcomes that you discussed in your book for change that factors in empathy, and change that is missing that ingredient?

Amy: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I think a wonderful thing that just happened this week in launch was I just published an article in *Forbes* magazine, which was lovely, about this exact thing. When empathy is not present, we feel it as people, as humans, because it's such a human thing for us. It's like when we feel we know we're not having empathy, we feel it. But most people don't understand what empathy really means, and what it means to be empathetic.

What I try to go down is this path of trying to link the two, is number one, is that when you dive into empathy, there are actually three kinds of empathy. If you look at the front of my book, there's a head, a heart, and a hand. And that's a theme that is shown throughout the book. I want to make it a little bit more visceral for people. It is not just thinking about somebody; this is called cognitive empathy, the brain. And I'm pointing to my head for those who are listening elsewhere. So, that's called cognitive empathy. That's the kind of empathy that means I am able to take your perspective; that's where the choice comes in. And what's interesting with cognitive empathy is that we will only have empathy for people that we truly value. So, if you're not valuing a person and that the person has dignity deep down inside, you're not actually going to have empathy for them, which is a very important thing for us to point out.

The second one is emotional or affective empathy; that's where the heart is. It's where I'm here to emotionally connect with you. And that requires you to understand your feelings in relation to another person.

And the third one is the hand. And that's called compassionate empathy or, simply, compassion. That is where you are listening to somebody, you feel their feelings, and then you're willing to help, if needed. But what I have found is really fascinating about that is that you're willing to help if needed, but it's not telling you to help. There's no action that's actually happening.

As I was diving into these definitions and kind of talking about the head, the heart, the hand, in that idea, I was like, there's something missing. So also, I've been building cultures of empathy and innovation. Since I am an empathetic person, I build cultures of empathy. But I also do not like the word "innovation," even though I do use it. I've been the Director of Innovation for more than a decade for things. But it is a meaningless word. It just is like, "I'm going to be innovative here. I'm going to be doing this," until you put like real meat behind it.

When I thought about this, I thought that innovation really means that we're trying to make something better. It's positive change. And then I had this equation that I have in my book called "Change equals empathy plus action." It's having those things, being there in presence

with that person, being there with them, but then acting upon that. And that's, actually, how the whole book kind of unfolded.

From there, there are three parts of the book. The first part is our empathy deficit. So, I make a case for the deficit that we have, as a country. And this is actually a term that President Barack Obama first mentioned in 2006. And so, I kind of talk about that, dysfunctional workplaces, a lot of other things that are happening in our world.

The second piece is learning empathy for change. What are the components that people need to understand so that you can switch and change and shift power and agency to people who, in a lot of ways, might be oppressed in the society or need to have empathy given to them?

And then the third piece is empathy and action. So, this is where I talk to organizations, I outline a startup, an established organization about this is how they're applying empathy or redefining themselves with empathy at the heart. And I also have a chapter at the end, which is about the Coronavirus, and how both change, and empathy has been ever present during our journey here in the pandemic, and it's shaping things faster than we ever thought was possible.

Patricia: Something I hadn't thought about at all, was how empathy is affected by the virus. I think about the social isolation and recognition of the impact of that, and how that has added a layer of stress. I was just talking with an attorney and a nurse, last evening, about the opioid crisis and about how the social isolation is fueling opioid use. And opioid use becomes too expensive for addicts after a while, and then they move to heroin because heroin is a lot less expensive per dose than \$30 for a pill of whatever on the street. And all of those things are spiraling and causing social and family and economic impacts.

One aspect of the virus that you might not have been thinking about, I hadn't been thinking about it, either, until he tied it in for me and he said, "Before the COVID pandemic, we put a lot of emphasis on the opioid crisis. Now it's gone underground, but it's larger than it ever was before."

Amy: I have thought about that, actually. So as part of my story, my father, I think I told you about this before we started recording here, but my

father was an alcoholic and an addict in many parts of his life. He just had an addictive personality. And so, as part of the journey that I've been on, I'm actually more predisposed to addiction myself and mental health issues. There were a lot of mental health issues that my father was having, too.

I have struggled with, and I have been diagnosed with complex PTSD, with anxiety and depression. And that shows up in a myriad of ways in my life. But it has led me to go down the path of not feeling loved, not feeling connected to people, not feeling like I belong in this world, to be frank. So, I've gone through a personal journey with this, I've seen other people in my life go through addiction. I've gone through my own addictions that I've had to deal with, in various ways. I see that, and I have thought about that deeply, about addiction.

And the heart of addiction is the lack of connection, in many different ways. A lot of people do talk about that, is that you're not connected, you don't feel like you have purpose in life, all of these things that like, and I think is representative of the larger society, really, not giving us the opportunities and fulfilling our personal internal needs.

Patricia: And isn't that a paradox, Amy, because the act of taking a substance that impairs your ability to relate to people, as you drift off into a high blood alcohol level or you drift away, mentally, after injecting yourself or swallowing substances, you cut yourself off from people even further?

Amy: Yeah. Yeah, that's what was interesting, is that when I saw my father drink alcohol, it was self-medication. I found this, and I also found this in my life, I was numbing out because I didn't like the life I was living. And that is just like a terrible place to be. And when I think about this, like my own struggles, and then other people's struggles, I realized that we're all collectively hurting, but we don't have an outlet for us to be able to process what is happening or had happened to us in the past.

And that's where, in my book, I talk, also, about, I'm very frank about finding this organization called Adult Children of Alcoholics. It's actually a 12-step program, but it's less steeped in like God and religion, but more on like trusting a higher power, and that a higher power is going to lead us to a better place, the universe I talk about,

that I'm going to get better over time. And it's about realizing that when you're in a home that is full of addiction, about alcoholism, it's a family disease.

So, you're all affected by it. And you learn distinct things that happen to you, and you bring that into adulthood. And that's why it's called Adult Children of Alcoholics. And you're bringing this into adulthood, but it's not very great ways of living in the world, to tell you the truth. It's very maladaptive. I have spent a lot of my career being a workaholic, or we're overeating, or doing all these things, because I was coping with the hurt that I was feeling inside.

So, the great thing is that after I found Adult Children of Alcoholics was that moment where I was in a community where people saw me, and I was heard, and I could talk about what was happening. And I blossomed after that. I have, we call them sponsors, just like in Alcoholics Anonymous, but my sponsor, I talk to her every week.

And it's incredible to see the kind of growth that you can have when you have a relationship like that, where it's like, I've been on that journey with you. I've been on that journey before, I'm here to help you along with your journey. And it's not just about your career, it's about your life. Yeah, it's incredible how just in a span of, I started doing it in 2015, right about the time when I had a nervous breakdown at Booz Allen, and then I came back and worked in the White House. So, since 2015, my world has completely shifted.

Patricia: It sure sounds like it. My goodness, talk about changes.

Amy: Yes. Central to my being.

Patricia: Well, I'd like to ask you one last question before we wrap up. And that is can you give us a quick overview, you talked about this as your launch week. I'm curious as to what you've done to launch your book. And then my last question will be how can our listener find out more about you, your services, and where to buy your book?

Amy: Okay. So, what's the first part of the question, again? I want to make sure I get that right.

Patricia: The launch week. What are you doing this week to launch the book?

Amy: We're still in the pandemic. So, a lot of this stuff is a lot of virtual stuff. And I'm also living on the east coast, and it's been snowing a lot recently, so it's kind of cold. So, not like I can just like have an outside book signing for people. But I do plan on having one in the spring. So, what that has entailed was doing a lot of things virtually, doing podcasts, doing talks. I think I've done; this is probably my sixth or seventh podcast in the past few weeks. Two of them came out yesterday, for example. I didn't know that they were going to come out the same day.

And then I did a live stream on Wednesday to talk about the book and celebrate with one of my best friends, who's a standup comedian and a storyteller. And we were testing our live stream, because I just got accepted into LinkedIn Live. So, I've just been going on social media. So, to bring it into how to get in touch with me, I am active on all things like Facebook, LinkedIn, also on Instagram, and Twitter. I post on those every day, pretty much multiple times a day this week because of everything, so you can reach me there.

But you can also go to empathyforchange.com, that will direct you to my personal website where you can learn more about me, my services, my journey. And I have a publication on Medium called Empathy for Change. And I've been writing pretty much every other day, snippets from my book, or things that came up for like example, on Martin Luther King's day, I did a thing honoring MLK and the journey that they had to do to actually have MLK Day, which is a fascinating story.

So, you can find me all these places. And I'm on Amazon, the book is on Amazon, and anywhere else books are sold, Barnes & Noble, bookshop, other places, too. And then when we can actually come in person to independent bookshops, or any kind of bookshops, it will be available everywhere, too. And also, on Overdrive.

So, libraries, it's available in your library. If you go into your online in your library, you can actually download it as well. But I would suggest you might want to download it and give a review. It'd be great to have you read it and do a review on Amazon for us to get the word out. And one thing I will ask, which is the last thing I'll say, is if you can pass along this podcast or just some information about to like five people that would love to hear this message or need to hear this

message, I would be eternally grateful. So that'd be helpful. Thank you.

Patricia: Well, thank you, Amy. I've been talking with Amy Wilson, this is Pat Iyer, discussing her book that was born this week, *Empathy for Change*. I would echo Amy in requesting that you tell other people, who are interested in writing books or who have written books, about the podcast because we love to be able to share the knowledge of our authors with our audience. And be sure to come back next week or click on down for the next interview, the next guest, in which we're talking about writing to get business.