



Tell  
Me



More



About  
That



Solving the  
**EMPATHY CRISIS**  
One Conversation  
at a Time

**ROB VOLPE**

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#### **NOTE TO READERS**

This bonus chapter contains original material created for *Tell Me More About That: Solving the Empathy Crisis One Conversation at a Time* by Rob Volpe. This chapter was written as one of several about Step 3: Active Listening, which is one of the 5 Steps to Empathy. Though some names and details have been changed for privacy reasons, the stories contained herein are true.

## Bonus Chapter

# Force Majeure

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*The stories I most love are about  
the benefits of being blown off course.*

**TILDA SWINTON**

**R**EACHING A PLACE of empathy is not the end goal. Empathy is actually a waypoint on the journey to a multitude of end states, a stop on the way to collaboration, decision-making, forgiveness, ideation, being of service, leadership, being neighborly, connection, friendship, and belonging, among other destinations. Like a junction or a roundabout, you have to pass through empathy in order to continue on to your chosen destination. While having empathy is not a guarantee of reaching that end point, it does ensure you'll get closer to success than if you didn't employ empathy in your navigation. Bypassing empathy would be like traveling on a very narrow, sheltered path without the benefit of the expansiveness that an open road can provide. For example, there's no way to alter course if you aren't able to dismantle your judgment (Step 1 of the 5 Steps to Empathy). Being judgmental will keep you on that so-called "straight and narrow" with blinders on to what's happening around you, including the view.

Once you've used the 5 Steps in the moment of interaction to get to that point of empathy, the roundabout in your journey, which direction you head and how you then utilize empathy is your decision. Often we're required to find empathy in the heat of a moment: to take a breath, dismantle our judgment, and approach a situation differently. That means asking good questions (Step 2) and then, Step 3, actively listening, which means being present in what is going on around you and the person you are interacting with. As we complete the 5 Steps and find empathy, we can then decide how to respond, furthering the journey down the path to our destination, be it collaboration, inspiration, decision-making, or offering comfort.

Staying focused in a conversation and responding empathetically can be challenging in the best of times. When you have to do it under stress during an act of God like a tornado, a hurricane, an earthquake, or a certain pandemic, it can border on impossible. I've found in those situations I have to have empathy with myself and how I'm responding to the disruption first before I can focus on the reaction of those around me.

I GREW UP IN INDIANA, the heart of "tornado alley," and it wasn't uncommon in the spring and early summer to have to deal with tornado watches and warnings as well as the real thing. One tornado event happened in June 1980 on my sister's seventh birthday. A party with a group of my sister's friends was scheduled for a Saturday at the local McDonald's. While we were inside for the birthday party, the sky outside was turning an eerie deep green—the kind of churning storm clouds you see in movies when an evil witch is casting a spell. My parents offered a reassuring mantra of "don't mind the sky, kids" to the gaggle of seven-year-olds and me, the eleven-year-old brother. While the allure of McDonald's French fries was pretty potent and kept our concern at a minimum, how could we not notice the sky? Clouds the color of pea soup were filling my head with worry! As everyone finished their Happy Meals,

my dad suggested we head back to the house where the party could continue in the basement while Mother Nature threw her own festivities outside. As the protective older brother, I helped my parents hustle the seven-year-old guests into the cars for the short trip back to our house. Once the girls were safely ushered downstairs into our unfinished basement, I helped bring my sister's toys down from her bedroom. I then took up a position in the family room to keep my eye on the threatening skies.

I remember looking out the sliding glass door onto our back patio and thinking I could hear a siren mixed in with the roar of the storm. Uncertain if my ears were playing tricks on me, I went to open the door to the garage. There it was. A distinct mechanical wail was audible like a shrill town crier. It was the tornado warning siren. I recognized it immediately from the weekly noon drills. Except this time it wasn't letting up; this time it was real. It was slicing across our neighborhood in repeated arcs as the alarm rotated on its post. I closed the door and gulped. Trying not to freak out, I went into the basement and quietly told my dad about the siren. We both knew that meant a tornado had been sighted nearby and to seek shelter immediately. I had learned at school that safety in a tornado means being below ground or in a central ground floor room like a closet or bathroom, crouched down low and underneath something. The basement made the most sense for everyone to ride out the storm while trying to continue the party. Despite the distractions of birthday cake, Barbies, and bellies already filled with Happy Meals, the girls were beginning to figure out something was going on. Who serves birthday cake in a basement? The intense thunder and frequent lightning penetrating the little basement windows was a sign of trouble. Heavy rain pounding on those windows was also a clue that this storm was severe. I tried to project an eleven-year-old's idea of an air of calm as I knew a panicky group of seven-year-old girls would not be easy to control. It didn't take much cognitive empathy—the ability to see another person's point

of view—to know they’d be panicked if my parents and I showed panic. Having this responsibility also managed to keep me focused. Did my parents plan that?

Most of the girls continued to play without a care about what was happening outside. Most of them. One was getting really freaked out and wanted to go home immediately, regardless of what the storm was doing. For her, there really was no place like home. Particularly compared to my family’s unfinished basement. Fear forged her into one determined seven-year-old. She was starting to cry a big ugly cry at a volume rivaling the tornado siren. Personally, I couldn’t blame her. Who wants to ride out a storm with relative strangers instead of safe at home in the arms of your parents? In my “professional” role as party wrangler, I needed to keep her calm. Sensing that she would benefit from some extra attention, I got her away from the rest of the girls so her fear wouldn’t infect the group with panic. We sat together at the bottom of the steps and started talking. I asked her about her parents and what they do at their house during a tornado warning. Hide in the basement? Great, see, that’s exactly what we’re doing. I also talked with her about her pets. I tried to keep her on happy topics. In hindsight this was an early example of me in moderator mode. I was also using empathy with her to calm her down. We talked until her tears stopped flowing. While we sat and talked, the rest of the party continued around us, the laughter and shrieks of little girls joined by sudden cracks of thunder and flashes of lightning.

Gradually the storm ended and the party was over. The tornado did not touch down near us. We had dodged that one.

THE NEXT TORNADO that came to town was when I was seventeen, in the spring of 1986. It arrived on a weekday in the middle of the afternoon. High school was still in session when the clouds on the horizon began turning that familiar green. Always a bad sign. Since the storm drew close just as the school day was ending, the

principal announced that all after-school activities were canceled, and we were to go directly home before the storm struck our town. That springtime, my after-school activities were rehearsals for our production of *The Sound of Music* (I played Uncle Max) and the committee in charge of planning the junior-senior prom.

*Prom’s only a few weeks away. Surely the prom committee will still meet.* That thought lodged in my seventeen-year-old brain and drove my actions, subsequently leading to my closest encounter yet with a tornado. I took my responsibilities on the committee seriously. Probably too seriously if I was willing to ignore Mother Nature. Reflecting on it now, it makes me wonder about people who ignore our “danger” instinct and move ahead putting themselves and others at risk. Why did I think the “no after-school activities” announcement wouldn’t apply to me and the prom committee? Yes, there were many “important” decisions to be made for prom, but none of them was actually worth risking my life or safety over. But at the time, I didn’t fully understand that. I wandered the deserted halls looking for either the teacher sponsoring our group or any of the other committee members. No one was to be found. My high school was abandoned. It was surreal to see this on a school day afternoon. Since no one was around, the meeting couldn’t happen. I realized I better head home as well. As I walked out into the parking lot, rain was starting to fall from that ghoulish green sky which was now overhead. It had only been ten or fifteen minutes after school was dismissed. At this point I would have been better off seeking shelter in the school, riding out the storm there. How quickly situations can change.

The car I was driving wasn’t a car but a bivouac van conversion that was popular in the 1980s. It was luxurious for the era, with a carpeted floor and walls, four captain’s chairs, a reclining bench seat in the very back, and interior lighting. With another driver or an alternate-universe version of me, it could have been the cool party van but due to my then-limited social cred, it was purely functional,

taking me back and forth from school. But I was grateful for the van now because I needed to make my way home quickly. The sky was continuing to darken and becoming even more threatening. Rain was falling but its friends, thunder and lightning, had yet to make an appearance.

The drive was exactly two miles in a northeast direction from the school and usually took ten minutes. The route was pretty direct, requiring five turns with only one stop sign and one stoplight on my way to the security of my house. I should be able to make it before the storm got worse.

Of course the stoplight was red by the time I arrived at the intersection of the major state road that bisected the town north to south. As I sat waiting with decreasing patience for the light to change, the rain started pounding on the roof of the van. It sounded like a thousand little madmen pummeling their tiny fists in a tantrum trying to break in. The wind began howling. What happened next transpired in a matter of seconds. These are my thoughts and observations as I recall them.

*Wow! The rain is blowing sideways now. Never seen that before.  
That's some wind! The stoplight is hanging sideways.  
The light is still red. When will it change to green so I can get out of here?  
Now the van is tilting from the force of the wind!  
Hey! The power just went out on the stoplight!  
What is that noise? Sounds like the dull rumble of a freight train.  
But the tracks through town are miles away.  
Um, that's not a train...  
It's a tornado! Cool! The sound really is just like people have said.  
But that means there's a tornado nearby.  
Where is it? I can't see anything behind me in the mirrors.  
What do I do?  
I know. I'm supposed to get out of the car and into a low-lying ditch.  
There! There's a ditch next to the road.*

*But it's filled with water.  
I don't want to lay in that ditch, I'll get soaked.  
I can't see the tornado.  
But I can hear it.  
Where is it?  
That ditch has a lot of water in it.  
No one else is getting out of their cars around me.  
The ditch could save my life.  
But the van is heavy, which means it'd be harder for the tornado to pick it up?  
Maybe I can ride it out in the van, even though it's tilting sideways?  
Where's the tornado?!  
Go for the ditch or get pitched by the tornado?  
That ditch is filled with water!  
That water has to be filthy.  
I'll catch some bad parasite if I get in the ditch.  
I could die if I stay in this van.  
I could die if I get in that water.  
Of embarrassment. No one else is getting out of their cars.  
Wait. It's stopped.  
The freight engine sound is disappearing.  
It's moving away.  
Just a light drizzle.  
It's much brighter now too.  
The traffic light is vertical again.  
I'm still alive.*

I burst into tears. Heaving sobs of relief. *I'm alive! That was a close call. I could have died in this van.* Slowly, the cars started threading their way through the intersection. Crossing this main road, I looked to the left and could see some damage to a building. The tornado just missed me. Another 150 yards farther east and it would have been on top of me.

Tears continued to stream down my face as I drove the rest of the way home. The tornado, which was heading toward the northeast, as all tornados do, was on a path headed straight for the subdivision I lived in. Driving along, I wasn't sure if my house and our cats were going to be there when I arrived. I turned into the neighborhood. Everything seemed in place. The road was clear. Trees upright, no limbs down. Roofs attached, no visible damage. I slowly worked my way through the neighborhood, still not seeing any signs of damage, but worried about what might be around the next corner. Tornados are so targeted in their destruction; one house could have been destroyed while the house next door remained untouched. I finally turned the corner onto our street. I heaved a sigh of relief. There was no debris blocking the road ahead. I could see our house. It was fine. Others nearby weren't as fortunate.

Back at the traffic light, after the tornado stopped chasing me, it ripped off the roof overhang at a gas station just north of the intersection where I was contemplating the pros and cons of getting into the ditch. The mangled roofing lay crumpled at the side of the road. Pieces of shredded metal and insulation were strewn across the road and into the wooded lot on the other side of the street.

After slicing across a corner of my subdivision, the tornado bore down on a house along the county road abutting the back of my neighborhood.

This house had been built into a gentle hillside. The lowest of its three levels was visible on one side but built into the hill behind it. The top two levels were completely above ground. A brown shingled roof arced up and over in a geometric pattern. It was like an eco-house without a complete geodesic design. None of that mattered to the tornado. Like a lawn mower cutting grass, the twister sheared the top two levels of the house clean off, scattering remnants of the residents' lives across the farm fields behind. Remarkably, on the lowest level, everything remained upright. From the road I could see drinking glasses standing on the kitchen

table, with jangled debris hanging down from above. That's what's always fascinated and terrified me about tornados: they can shred two stories off a house yet leave the subterranean areas untouched and the house next door unscathed. So focused is a tornado that only things immediately in its path are impacted while neighboring structures and trees are left untouched.

THOSE EPISODES WITH TORNADOS gave me a healthy appreciation for the power of Mother Nature and acts of God. And they gave me ready access to empathy for those affected.

Living in LA in the early '90s reinforced my respect for the power of nature, notably when I found myself on top of the most powerful aftershock of the Northridge quake. That day, I was part of a photo shoot for a fundraiser I had developed for GLAAD, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. We were shooting a multi-racial group to illustrate that the LGBTQ+ community is "who you are—your family, your friends, your coworkers, your neighbors." In other words, it was promoting taking an empathetic perspective with my community—we were just like the recognizable faces in your own life, and by seeing us for who we are, real people, it would reduce homophobia and increase acceptance.

The shoot was in a photographer's home studio in Northridge. All was going really well and we were on a short break when suddenly everything started shaking and slamming in all directions. I remember seeing the heavy wooden dining table jumping up and down off the floor repeatedly, just like the bed of the little girl, Regan, in *The Exorcist*. Startled and terrified, we all scrambled outside into the backyard so we'd be away from anything that could fall in the house.

That, we discovered, was a 5.0 aftershock—nearly as strong as the original quake. And it was centered right underneath us in Northridge.

We were in shock but managed to pull ourselves together and take a few more pictures. The photographer thought he had what he needed so we called it a wrap and went home with an incredible story.

A week later, when I met up with the photographer, he showed me the contact sheet of all the shots he took. Through his loupe I saw lots of warm, engaged smiles, and bright eyes directed at the camera. Great pictures. Lots to choose from. He then called my attention to the last three that he took. Those images looked different. Smiles were forced. Eyes looked wild and jittery. Our faces were slightly scrunched. Even though we were posed and seemingly “calm,” we were merely doing our best to hide the panic we still felt at what had just happened. Naturally I chose one of the photos from before the aftershock for our visibility campaign.

WHILE NOT A NATURAL DISASTER, 9/11 was another unforeseen act that I witnessed firsthand from a walkway on the Manhattan Bridge. Like many New Yorkers, this tragedy affected me deeply and altered the course my life was on. I couldn't help but imagine what it was like for the people at Ground Zero as the towers collapsed, let alone the people on the planes and in the towers. I have wondered over the years, if I were in the towers when the planes struck, would I have evacuated? Or would I have continued to work, perhaps heading for a meeting like I did all those years ago in high school? A plane strike to a building is certainly more severe and alarming than a tornado warning. I hope I've learned to get out of harm's way and not question it. I'm grateful I haven't had to find out what I would do. In any case, 9/11 did reinforce my understanding that disaster can strike at any time, and you need to be prepared, within reason. It also dried up my nascent consulting business and pushed me back into the warm embrace of a large corporation which, fortuitously, brought me closer to my career in marketing research.

As I moved into a career in insights and regularly journeyed into people's homes in strange cities and other parts of the country, I realized that we needed to always be prepared for the unexpected. Not just for the surprise answer to a routine question, but to any

force majeure that may cross our path. Preparation was even more important since we regularly bring our clients with us into the field, to our interviews with respondents. I tried to have empathy with the fact that those clients joining us may not have had the same experiences that I had. Providing some reminders (or education) on what to do in the unlikely event of an emergency would help ease discomfort about being in the field and allow them to get on with building empathy. I read once that studies have found that by reviewing safety procedures, like the safety briefing on an airplane, people have an increased likelihood of getting out of a situation safely. As a result of these findings, we developed a section in the Ignite 360 pre-field briefing document that reviews what to do in case of an emergency, including natural disasters that felt relevant for the part of the country we were visiting.

It was in Denver in the summer of 2011 on a project exploring the role that fruit snacks play in kids' and tweens' snacking habits when one of the clients had questions about the natural disasters we included in the briefing.

“But what do I do if there's a zombie attack?” she asked as we drove around Denver.

“How about a meteor strike? What do I do in the event of a meteor strike while I'm here?” she continued with more than a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

We laughed and I played along with her apocalyptic, end-of-the-world scenarios. She was giving us a good-natured ribbing about the “in case of emergency” portion of our pre-field briefing. It felt like an imperative to provide our clients with the information they need to take care of themselves given all the unfamiliar cities and places that we go to, not to mention strangers that we meet. Particularly since going out into the field like this was the exception to the clients' day-to-day jobs. And so, with the client teasing us about zombies and meteors, we drove around Denver. It seemed like nothing bad was going to happen.



I told her the story of yet another run-in with a tornado. This one happened only months earlier while in the field. The clients knew what to do because they paid attention to the safety briefing. We were in Alabama on a project getting to know working-class Americans. I had just had an amazing session earlier that day with a respondent, Emmajean (whose colorful life I wrote about in Chapter 9, “Peeling the Onion,” in Step 2’s section of *Tell Me More About That*). Later that night, I was asleep in my hotel room when all of a sudden, the alarm in the room went off. In fact, it sounded like every alarm in the hotel was going off. I looked outside; it was dark, but I could tell it was storming. I turned on the TV and saw a weather report come on: a line of powerful thunderstorms and tornados were cutting across Alabama. The radar showed a line of red from the top of the state all the way south to the Gulf Coast, moving from east to west like the blade of a chef’s knife sweeping across a cutting board. The storms were violent and intense. Tornados were touching down all around the Birmingham metro.

At our hotel, guests were encouraged to seek shelter in the lobby restrooms which were designated as the tornado shelter. That was the right place to be. Looking at the radar and the weather outside, it didn’t seem to me like a tornado was in the vicinity. I decided to pack up my suitcase just in case something did happen—at least my clothes and respondent papers wouldn’t be strewn across Birmingham. However, instead of hitting the shelter in the hotel, I chose to sit in the bathroom of my guest room, on the fifth floor, connected to a website where I could see the latest radar reports. I’d head downstairs if danger seemed imminent.

I know. I know. This was nearly as stupid and foolish as my certainty of a prom committee meeting during the tornado I experienced in high school! My thought in this situation in Alabama was that if I had heard a siren going off, then I would have beelined it. I still hadn’t fully learned the lesson. Like the ditch filled with water that I didn’t want to get into, I didn’t want to sully myself by having

to go wait in a public toilet. At least the clients I briefed earlier that day had listened and followed instructions. Unlike me, *they* were in the tornado shelter in the lobby.

A couple of hours passed and the storms had swept to the east of us. We were safe. Tornados struck all around Birmingham, including near the airport, but the area around our hotel was spared. I got lucky (again) but I felt really dumb for staying in my room. I would never have made it out of there if a tornado had struck the building.

AFTER A FEW DAYS IN DENVER, our group moved on to a second city in order to hear a broader point of view and account for regional and cultural differences in snacking habits. In one of the in-home interviews in the second city, I remember the house as being a split level. For this interview I was along to observe so I didn’t have the heavy lifting of moderating and could instead watch and listen. We structured this project to talk to moms and kids with two moderators so the conversations could happen concurrently. This had the intended benefit of moms not influencing the kids and vice versa. The logistics were straightforward: after starting off in a group to build rapport, one moderator would take the kids aside and interview them in the playroom or family room while the second moderator interviewed the mom, usually in the kitchen. We had cameras set up and rolling on both scenes.

One of the moderators, Jonee, was with the mom, and the other moderator, Julie, was with the kids. I chose to sit in the kitchen for the mom’s interview. My chair was away from the table everyone was sitting around, more in the kitchen area itself next to the dishwasher and cabinets. The dishwasher was quietly purring as it neared the end of its cycle. There were also two wine bottles on the counter next to me. I was seated in a chair, which meant the counter was about ear level. The mom, Dana, was telling us about her two girls and how they chose their snacks.

**Dana:** So a lot of times, now [Jenny] can help herself. She's at the age where she doesn't want me to get it for her. So, all the snacks that she can have any time are pretty much either in that cabinet or in the fridge where she can reach them. Audrey, she's a little harder because she doesn't snack.

Somewhere in the middle of Dana's last sentence, I noticed that the two wine bottles that were sitting on the counter next to me started clinking together. *That's odd*, I thought. *What's causing that?* The dishwasher directly underneath the bottles had been running earlier but the bottles weren't shaking then. And it was not like there was some "spin" cycle on the dishwasher to cause the vibration. I looked at the bottles again. They were jiggling closer and closer together. They were shaking.

**Dana:** What the heck is that?

**Moderator:** It's an earthquake.

**Dana:** Is it?

**Moderator:** Yes.

**Dana:** Yes, we are. Yes, it is.

**Moderator:** That's an earthquake.

**Client:** You guys have earthquakes around here?

**Dana:** No. That was absolutely an earthquake.

**Moderator:** Yes, it was. Okay!

If we had been in California this probably wouldn't have raised an eyebrow. In fact, about two years before this I had been in a small temblor during an in-home session in Los Angeles and I was unphased by that. But we were in the Philadelphia suburbs. This

didn't feel anything like that LA tremor nor the big Northridge after-shock, but it left us rattled just the same. You never know with a quake how strong it's going to get and how long it will last. At what point do you seek cover? Kind of like at what point should you get out of your van and into the ditch to be protected from a tornado?

What felt like a long time in the moment really only lasted a few seconds when I reviewed the transcripts and video. Within a minute or so we were back on to the topic of the session: kids and their snacking.

While the wine bottles rattled in the kitchen, my colleague Julie was talking with the kids. Two girls, Audrey, age nine, and Jenny, seven. At the time, Audrey was telling Julie about a TV show they really liked.

**Audrey:** But then they helped him fix it and then Doofenshmirtz turned it on and it was facing the couch and he saw a different couch that looked different so he went in there and he could actually go in there. But then Phineas and Ferb went in and then they were in the different dimension.

**Julie:** What's that shaking noise? Is that an earthquake? Are we having an earthquake?

**Client:** Is that an earthquake?

**Julie:** Is that an earthquake?

**Videographer:** It was.

**Dana (the mom):** That was absolutely an earthquake, yes.

**Julie:** Do they have earthquakes in Pennsylvania?

**Client:** They do now.

**Client:** Did you guys ever feel an earthquake before?

**Audrey:** No.

**Jenny:** No.

**Client:** Okay.

**Jenny:** And that little thingy, my mom just bought me a book.

And just like that, the kids continued as though nothing had happened, telling us about their media habits. The adults chose to spend a few moments talking about our experiences with earthquakes, but the kids were unphased and kept going. Looking at the video of that moment, when Jenny continued talking about her new book, Julie glanced back at the camera with a look of “*what was that?*” on her face. With her face turned away from the kids, she exhaled and pulled herself back together while the kids kept talking. Just like those of us in the photo shoot in Northridge, Julie was shaken. But unlike the photo shoot models, she recognized her need to make space for herself to regain composure.

Back in Philadelphia, for most of us, the conversation continued to flow as the discussion guide had intended. I, however, found myself continually distracted, searching for news on what had happened and the severity of the damage. My mind wasn’t on the interview; it was clattering around trying to make sense of what had happened. If the quake made things rattle in Dana’s house, what was it like at the epicenter? Where was the epicenter? We soon started getting answers. The group had progressed on to the kitchen tour portion of the interview when I saw on my phone that it was a 5.8 earthquake centered south of Washington, DC, in southern Virginia. “Holy moly” was Dana’s reaction, “that was pretty big,” she commented before nonchalantly continuing the tour . . . “so here is our cereal/snack cabinet where Jenny can go and do what she needs to do and grab whatever she wants.”

Again, maybe it’s my PTSD from tornados, earthquakes, and 9/11, but I was still weirded out. That was an earthquake on the EAST COAST! That doesn’t happen often. We just experienced

something historic, right there, in the middle of a conversation about snacks for kids.

I needed extra time to sit with how I was feeling before I could return to being present and focused. I did that by giving myself the space to process. I was fortunate I wasn’t moderating that session. And if I had been, my instinct is that I would have suggested a pause, taken a moment to have a few deep breaths to allow myself to regain a calm composure, and probably have had more discussion on the topic with everyone present. That’s because active listening requires all of your senses, not just your ears. If you are mentally distracted by something else, you aren’t going to be paying attention. Even in the role I was in, I was not able to actively listen. Julie’s turn away from the kids to pull herself together was her realigning herself so that she could regain focus and actively listen. I took even longer to do that.

If you find yourself unfocused, it’s okay to acknowledge it and ask a clarifying or confirming question to get yourself back on track. I did that with Dana toward the end of the interview when I asked, “I was a little distracted with the earthquake, did you say you grew up eating fruit snacks?” Dana answered my question and honored that my mind was elsewhere due to the temblor we’d just experienced.

What we all needed to understand, in that moment, was that each one of us needed to process the event in our own way. The clients, the moderators, the videographers, the mom, and the kids. Each one of us had a different take on what we had just experienced. For some it was a first time, for others it was more familiar. And because we’d all had different life experiences that taught us to react with responses ranging from afraid to nonplussed, we had to actively listen to the cues we were getting from others, plus the ones our own minds and bodies were emitting. And then, we needed to give ourselves and each other the space to have that reaction.

But you don’t need to experience an event on the scale of an act of God in order to use your active listening skills. You can use

these skills in your day-to-day life. Pay attention to the nonverbal cues you get from others, as they often say as much as the words you hear. Combined, it provides important data to consider as you determine your (hopefully) empathetic response in any situation. Be aware by actively listening to the needs of those around you; others may respond differently from you, and it is important to give them the space to do that. And make sure you are having empathy with yourself too. By recognizing where you are coming from, it will help inform how you choose to interact with others.

**A FORCE MAJEURE.** An unforeseeable circumstance that impedes progress or an action. It can blow us off course, interrupt our entire life, or impact a year, a month, a day, or even just a few moments during a meeting or an in-home interview. How we choose to process it, with empathy toward ourselves and others, is what makes the difference in how we overcome the adversity or let the adversity overcome us.

The experiences I've shared here may not have been as thrilling as what I imagine a zombie apocalypse, meteor strike, or alien invasion might be, but my interactions with Mother Nature have taught me to respect her and the other sudden events that can knock us off course. I'm learning to pay attention, to actively listen, and to give myself—and others—the space to process what has been experienced and then respond accordingly. With empathy as part of the journey.

### **EMPATHETIC REFLECTIONS**

- Have you ever found yourself in a “force majeure” situation? How did you process it to allow yourself to regain focus? When does the force majeure situation take precedence?
- What gets in your way of actively listening and being present in a conversation? How might you adapt to improve your skills?
- Of all the actions that empathy can help achieve, where do you see yourself struggling? How would you describe what you need to overcome in order to get to that destination?

