

REVISED
AND
UPDATED

*What
Your
Feelings
Are Trying
to Tell You*

The
LANGUAGE
of
EMOTIONS

KARLA McLAREN, M.Ed.



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PRAISE FOR *THE LANGUAGE OF EMOTIONS*

“Karla McLaren’s revised and updated book, *The Language of Emotions*, presents a model for understanding emotions and explores the positive aspects of anxiety. Karla uses her lived experience of trauma to inform her readers in ways that may enable them to achieve the emotional understanding necessary to learn from and move beyond their past. There is no doubt that Karla’s passion to help her readers understand emotions, and provide them with useful tools to do so, makes this new edition of her book a gift for those who are suffering from or grappling with what they feel.”

MARY LAMIA, PHD

author of *Grief Isn’t Something to Get Over* and *Understanding Myself*

“Karla McLaren’s book *The Language of Emotions* is the first I will recommend to survivors of traumatic and abusive environments and relationships. Karla’s knowledge of how to understand emotions and engage with them in a positive and healing way is an invaluable resource.”

JANJA LALICH, PHD

author of *Take Back Your Life* and *Bounded Choice*

“Karla McLaren’s unique, empathic view of emotions surprisingly revalues even the most ‘negative’ emotions and opens pathways to understanding the depths of the human soul.”

MICHAEL MEADE

author of *The World Behind the World* and *The Water of Life*

“This book changed the way I relate to others, and to myself, forever.”

GAVIN DE BECKER

author of *The Gift of Fear* and *Protecting the Gift*

The Language of Emotions

Also by Karla McLaren

The Power of Emotions at Work: Accessing the Vital Intelligence in Your Workplace

Embracing Anxiety: How to Access the Genius of This Vital Emotion

The Dynamic Emotional Integration® Workbook

The Art of Empathy: A Complete Guide to Life's Most Essential Skill

Escaping Utopia: Growing Up in a Cult, Getting Out, and Starting Over (with Janja Lalich)

The Language of Emotions

What Your Feelings Are Trying to Tell You

REVISED AND UPDATED

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Preface to the New Edition

Emotions are a vital part of everything you are: every thought, every choice, every relationship, every dream, every failure, every triumph, every act of violence, and every act of love. When you can learn their language, you can change your life. When we can all learn their language, we can change the world.

Welcome! If you're a reader of the original *Language of Emotions*, I'm so glad that you've returned for this update. If you're new to this work, I'm pleased to present this up-to-date version to you. For centuries, the emotions have been repressed, downplayed, distrusted, overglorified, and even despised, yet they never deserved such abusive treatment. I'm glad that you can join me in this exploration of the brilliance, ingenuity, healing power, and jaw-dropping genius of our emotions.

The original version of *The Language of Emotions* was the first book to approach the emotions in terms of how they function, what they do, and how to work with them. Instead of treating emotions as problems to be solved or eradicated, I focused on them as the vital and irreplaceable aspects of cognition, meaning-making, behavior, and intelligence they truly are. In this work, we treat the emotional realm as an intelligent system that *requires* all of its members, including tragically disrespected emotions such as anxiety, depression, jealousy, envy, hatred, panic, and the suicidal urge (among others).

Because so many of our emotions are deeply distrusted and unwanted, I was working without a net as I wrote the original version of this book, and I missed some things. Now, after more than a decade of further research and practice, and with the support and camaraderie of an international community of colleagues and friends, I've had the opportunity to understand the emotions more deeply. I'm honored and excited to be able to update this book and share this new information with you.

BUILDING A NEW MODEL AND A NEW COMMUNITY

So much has happened since I turned in the manuscript for the original version of this book in 2009. I went to graduate school and developed a new model of empathy for my book *The Art of Empathy*, where I also fixed a *huge* mistake I made about my dear friend anxiety. In the original version of this book, I did not treat anxiety as a distinct and valuable emotion (I mistakenly viewed it as a problem with the regulation of fear). Now, thank goodness, I know better, and I wrote the book *Embracing Anxiety* to apologize to this marvelous emotion that

helps us get things done. In *The Art of Empathy*, I also developed a four-key model to help you understand emotions, and I'll share those keys in this new edition.

Most importantly, in 2014 I met Amanda Ball, who wanted to ground her master's degree in mental health counseling on the work in this book. She said she would do it with or without me, and I chose *with*. Amanda's fierce and funny dedication made me realize that there needed to be an applied version of my work. Together, we developed what we now call Dynamic Emotional Integration®, or DEI for short (at that time, diversity trainings did not widely include the word *equity* in their titles, so the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion version of DEI wasn't yet in widespread use).

We began training people in DEI in 2015, and today we have a marvelous international community of licensed DEI professionals in 10 countries, a thriving online teaching platform called Empathy Academy, and we're now teaching our seventh licensing cohort.

It has been a whirlwind in some ways but deeply grounding in many others, because I realized during our first cohort that the heart of DEI lives in our community and not merely in my writing and research. Through the intelligence, deep empathy, raucous humor, and argumentation that are central to our DEI community, we've added to, removed, changed, or reimaged a number of the concepts and practices I developed. Now, thanks to Amanda's initial push and her continued dedication and support (and the support of lead DEI instructors Sherry Olander and Jennifer Nate), DEI is a rich, living framework of emotional and empathic knowledge and practice.

WHAT'S NEW?

In this book, you'll learn how to engage directly with the gifts your emotions bring to you, and in part, you'll do that by asking questions to reveal each emotion's unique genius. In this new edition, I've refined many of the questions because I and the DEI community have come to understand emotions more clearly. I've also created questions for the happiness family of emotions (happiness, contentment, and joy). Originally, they only had statements of acknowledgment, and I thank DEI professional Heather Giasson (and everyone else who argued with me for years) for finally helping me understand why the happiness family needs questions.

I also understand shame, apathy, jealousy, envy, grief, panic, and confusion a heck of a lot better than I did back in 2009. Anxiety now gets its own chapter, the entire fear family receives an update, apathy receives its deserved respect, and loneliness gets its own chapter (even though it's not an emotion). Overall, each emotion and each concept gets a freshening perspective here, either in the body of the book or in the [notes](#) section. I've also added my favorite definition of emotions from sociologist Arlie Hochschild, I've brought in a model I call the Four Keys to

Emotional Genius to help you reframe emotions, and I've added new practices and concepts to help you understand and work with your emotions brilliantly. Supplemental material, including an Emotional Skills Inventory and practices such as Ethical Empathic Gossip, are available on my website, karlamclaren.com/the-language-of-emotions-book.

Welcome to the new *Language of Emotions*!

A note before you begin: The teaching and consulting work I do occur in a sacred and private space that does not lend itself to the presentation of case studies or composite histories. In this book, I rely instead upon storytelling, analogies, research, and personal experiences in order to create a similar kind of sacred space with you.

You are the expert of your own experience, and no book, system, ideology, or person should ever be allowed to unseat your own wisdom. If the ideas and practices in this book make sense to you, use them with my blessing. If they don't make sense, ignore them with my blessing.

If you're struggling with repetitive anxiety, depression, panic, rage, or any other emotional state that isn't working for you, know that yes, you can work with the concepts and practices in this book. However, you may also want to check in with your doctor or a counselor. There's good help available (an excellent place to start is the nonprofit website HelpGuide.org), and if you have any ongoing imbalances in your emotional realm, asking for and receiving help is an excellent idea. This book will be supportive as you explore your emotional realm, and at the same time, it's important to make sure that you're safe, comfortable, and well cared for before you begin.

Honor your individuality and your unique emotional makeup, make changes at your own pace (or not at all), and approach this work with due caution and a deep dedication to your own autonomy and integrity.

Onward and forward,

Karla McLaren, M.Ed.

PART I

Restoring Your Native Language

Beyond sculptures and symphonies,
beyond great works and masterpieces
is the greater, finer art of creating a conscious life.

Genius appears everywhere,
but never so magnificently
as in a life well lived.

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.