



Perfecting the Art of Connecting

A Unity minister
designs a powerful tool
to encourage empathy
and ignite insight

By Mallory Ragon

Rita Marie Johnson is all about connectivity—although not in a Wi-Fi kind of way. The Belton, Missouri, native and Unity minister is the founder of Rasur Foundation International (RFI), a nonprofit organization seeking to develop a more connected world. The foundation accomplishes this through its twin programs—the Connection Practice (designed for businesses, schools, nonprofits, and the general public) and the BePeace Practice (the same program for churches and spiritual organizations).

Johnson's initiative began not long after she moved to Costa Rica in 1993, inspired by the country's identification with peace and lack of a standing army (abolished in 1948). She founded the Rasur Foundation five years later, and after studying with the Institute of HeartMath and the Center for Nonviolent Communication, she designed what she describes as a social-emotional skill that boosts both empathy and insight—a method now taught in both RFI programs. In 2004, Johnson began teaching her methods in Costa Rican public schools and won an Ashoka Changemakers Innovation Award the following year. More than 1,500 teachers in Costa Rica have received training from RFI, benefiting 40,000 students in 45 schools.

Johnson has since expanded the teaching to a global audience. So far, RFI has certified almost 100 coaches and trainers in the Caribbean, Central and North America, Japan, and New Zealand to teach people of all ages, racial, ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds how to use this invaluable skill in their personal and professional lives. Johnson also brought the BePeace program to Unity Village; the 24 participants she first attracted in 2008 almost quadrupled the following year. Starting in 2010, she began teaching the program at the United Nations-mandated University for Peace, a graduate school for international leaders located in Costa Rica.

Name That Pain

Johnson explains that the initial step of this scientifically based method is to be able to connect with ourselves—starting with being able to name our feelings and needs. She points to research that shows this can actually decrease activity in the amygdala, the part of the brain closely linked with our emotional reactions (and the part that can trigger stress, fear, or a flight response). Most of us don't need a neuroscientist to tell us that when we're able to express our emotions, we feel calmer.

“In our world, we've been taught to habitually disconnect from ourselves,” Johnson explains. “But in order to be fully alive, we need to consciously connect with what's going on inside. To begin that process, we can learn to connect what we're feeling with what we're needing.” Once we accomplish this, she notes, we can respond in a healthier way by taking responsibility for getting our needs met. “When we're clear on what we need,” she adds, “we can give empathy by artfully guessing the feelings and needs of other people.”

For example, have you ever found yourself, perhaps at work, in a situation where someone appeared angry or upset, but was not particularly eager to have an open conversation? Johnson suggests using empathy to put yourself in their place, to guess what their feelings and needs might be. By connecting heart to heart in this way, you can completely change your interaction from a negative one to a positive one.

Stellar Success

Johnson remembers a difficult experience in her own work history where she did exactly that: During an organizational transition, she was assigned to work with a man from another department. At the first meeting, he did the majority of the talking and turned to blaming and belittling when she tried to communicate her own thoughts. His behavior completely threw her off-guard—she wasn't expecting such a difficult conversation. While the meeting didn't end in conflict, Johnson felt they hadn't gotten anywhere. She decided to be better prepared for their second meeting and spent some time considering both sides of the exchange. She named her own feelings (resentful, pessimistic, discouraged) and her

needs (communication, trust, respect, progress) and found she was already feeling different.

By using this technique, Johnson found a way to be in touch with herself and identify what was going on for her. Then she thought about what his feelings might be: Perhaps he was worried, stressed, or pressured. She supposed maybe he wasn't happy about this assignment. She guessed he needed to be heard and to feel like he mattered, and like her, he also needed trust and progress.

Following the next steps of the practice, Johnson generated a feeling of appreciation and asked herself what she needed to know. The insight that came to her was that in this situation, less would be more. Heart and brain in alignment, she was ready for the next meeting. When they got together, Johnson just listened and tried to convey that she understood where he was coming from: She nodded and let him know she really heard what he was saying, and when he had finished talking, she was then able to share what she needed to say. Because he had been heard at such a deep level, he agreed to her requests. She had embraced her feelings and needs as well as his and acted on her insight.

“We not only made progress,” she remembers, “but I felt as though we'd also made an authentic, warm connection.”

Johnson can tell story after story of others who created similar connection successes through the practice, including churches where relationships with their congregations and their communities are thriving, schools that have been able to help students with special needs, and summer camps reaching out to youth traditionally characterized as “at-risk.” She notes



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that Unity ministers and schoolteachers are especially thrilled to find new ways to promote peace through connection.

Johnson says the Connection Practice can be particularly beneficial for children who have special needs, learning disabilities, or deficits in social and emotional learning. They use the Rasur Foundation’s Feelings and Needs Cards, which are designed to help kids identify and share what they are really experiencing inside—sometimes for the first time.

“It’s not just sad, mad, glad,” Johnson says of the cards. The deck has 48 feelings cards (naming emotions such as angry, disappointed, and appreciative) and 48 needs cards (covering needs such as honesty, space, and love). Schools that have adopted the Connection Practice as part of weekly or daily routines are finding students can’t wait to get out what they call simply “the cards.” Their behavior is improving as they not only learn how to identify their feelings, but then also use that knowledge to get their needs met, connecting with each other on a deeper level. It’s made a big difference in their social and emotional environment, Johnson notes.

Plugging Sneaky Leaks

What happens when despite our best efforts, we can’t identify our feelings and needs? Johnson says this can lead to dysfunctional behavior or to what she calls “tragic strategies,” such as lying, hiding, or aggressiveness. “When we’re not connected to our feelings and needs,” she notes, “they’re going to leak out the sides.” Sometimes, for example, we act before we know what we’re doing, or even before we know what we’re feeling, particularly in a world that tends to encourage us *not* to look too closely at those things. Such behaviors, she warns, can lead to unintentional (and sometimes unfortunate) consequences.

“When we live unconsciously like that,” she says, “we do many things that we regret.” And that can work to fuel the cycle because when we are living from a disconnected place, it becomes harder to establish connections, both internally and externally.



Rita Marie Johnson teaching at Unity of Fairfax, Virginia.



Rita Marie Johnson teaching the BePeace Path at the UN-mandated University for Peace.



Students in the original School of Rasur in Costa Rica.



Costa Rican students conducting a BePeace Mediation.

We start to look for solutions to problems or conflicts based only on past experience or maybe logic, disregarding what our empathy and insight might be telling us about the big picture. Our choices and actions don’t come from a place where our heart and brain are in alignment.




Because truly listening to what’s going on inside and investigating that further can be a bit scary and intimidating, RFI offers some helpful resources. The organization’s online program, called the Connection Experience (www.rasurinternational.org/the-connection-experience), gives participants the opportunity to make face-to-face video calls with a certified teacher who will help them through a negative experience or work with them on learning how to have deeper, juicier, positive experiences. The sessions are designed to help people move forward with clarity and confidence.

In addition, Johnson is publishing a new book, *Completely Connected: Uniting Our Empathy and Insight for Extraordinary Results*, this spring that will provide even more information and instruction for deepening connection. Available later this year through RFI’s website (www.rasurinternational.org), the book is a guide to solving problems creatively, preventing and resolving conflict, continuing to build social and emotional intelligence, and creating a sense of belonging.

“If we all practiced connection, we would act more frequently out of solid self-esteem rather than from our insecurities,” Johnson says, envisioning the best possible outcome. “We would know how to keep everyone’s needs on the table and we would seek the intuitive solutions for getting those needs met. Connection would take us beyond the limits of ‘either/or’ thinking and into the sky of ‘both/and’ possibilities.” Isn’t that the world we would like to live in? 🌍

PEACE TOUR

Costa Rica

Rev. Rita Marie Johnson and Unity Institute and Seminary will host a guided tour of Costa Rica from March 7–14 for a group of 20 people. The eight-day tour includes such sights as the Poas Volcano National Park and the La Paz Waterfall Gardens, as well as the option to take a canopy zip line tour, a horseback ride to a volcano, a hanging bridge tour, a hike, a soak in the hot springs, or a spa treatment. Two days of optional service work (such as light cleaning and painting) at the United Nations-mandated University for Peace will also be offered. Visit www.unityinstitute.org/travel to learn more or call 866-348-6489 (toll-free) to reserve your space.