Micaela Redmond

SPEAKER · FACILITATOR · FOUNDER OF EIGHTEENFOURTEEN

PERSPECTIVES

The Energy Between Us

What we exchange when we encounter one another, and why it matters in the way we work, lead, and serve.

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Micaela Redmond, LMT, CMP, PMP
Founder, EighteenFourteen

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What we exchange when we encounter one another, and why it matters in the way we work, lead, and serve.

By Micaela Redmond, LMT, CMP, PMP · November 2026

You know the feeling. You walk into a room and something is different. Nobody has announced it. Nobody has given you a briefing. But the conversation is tight, the pauses are long, and people seem to be choosing their words very carefully.

Now consider another room. Someone greets you as though you are genuinely welcome. They look up when you speak. You do not have to prove you belong there. The interaction is ordinary, perhaps only a minute long, but you notice yourself becoming more at ease.

We often call this energy. We say a room felt heavy, a person felt warm, or an encounter left us drained. The language is imperfect, but the experience is recognizable. We feel each other. We encounter each other. And we leave those encounters with something.

That observation is both a spiritual invitation and a serious question for psychology: What, exactly, are we exchanging?

What We Mean When We Say Energy

In spiritual practice, energy may describe the felt quality of presence, the sense that we participate in a shared life rather than moving through the world as isolated individuals. That is a meaningful philosophical interpretation. It is not, by itself, a measurement of a transferable invisible force.

Science offers several more specific ways to describe what happens between people: facial expression, movement, tone of voice, attention, appraisal, emotional mimicry, physiological responses, expectations, and behavior. None captures every part of an encounter. Together they help explain why human presence is never merely decorative.

Elaine Hatfield, John Cacioppo, and Richard Rapson described emotional contagion as a set of processes through which people may converge emotionally, including through mimicry and feedback[1]. It is not mind reading. It is not proof that everyone absorbs everyone else's emotions. It is evidence that feeling is, in part, relational.

A Room Can Change Because One Person Walks In

In a well-known experiment, Sigal Barsade introduced an actor expressing different moods into small groups completing a managerial task. The emotional tone spread among group members, and the study observed consequences for cooperation, conflict, and perceived performance[2].

Consider what that means for the places where we work. A leader's mood does not determine every outcome; individuals are not emotional puppets. But how a leader enters a meeting may shape what becomes easier or harder for others to say. The same is true of the facilitator opening a retreat, the nurse approaching a patient, and the person answering a customer's phone call.

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The atmosphere is not something that happens around the work. Sometimes it becomes part of the work.

Emily Butler's framework of temporal interpersonal emotion systems takes this further. Emotion in a relationship is not simply two private experiences happening side by side; partners' expressions, experiences, and physiological responses can influence one another over time[3]. The interaction itself has a history. Something said at the beginning changes what can happen next.

Our Bodies Participate, Too

We tend to imagine connection as a matter of words or beliefs. But bodies are also involved. In a small neuroimaging study, James Coan and colleagues found that holding a spouse's hand while anticipating a threat was associated with reduced activity in several threat-responsive brain regions, compared with facing the threat alone[4]. This does not mean touch is always helpful or that the result generalizes to every relationship. It demonstrates something more modest and still remarkable: the presence of another person can change a measured response to threat.

Social Baseline Theory, developed by Coan and David Sbarra, proposes that humans tend to anticipate access to supportive relationships as part of the resources available for managing demands[5]. Under some conditions, support changes how much effort or vigilance a situation seems to require.

Researchers also study interpersonal physiological synchrony, or coordinated changes in measures such as heart rate, respiration, or skin conductance. But synchrony is not a universal signature of love, attunement, or safety. A 2026 review in Nature Reviews Psychology emphasizes that the psychological meaning of physiological synchrony remains ambiguous and varies across methods and settings[6]. The honest finding is more interesting than a mystical shortcut: bodies can become coordinated during interaction, while the meaning of that coordination still requires careful interpretation.

The Exchange Goes Both Ways

A customer experiences a business. The business also experiences the customer. Service encounters are not one-directional broadcasts of carefully packaged brand emotion.

Research by Xiao-Yu Liu, Nai-Wen Chi, and Dwayne Gremler examines how employee and customer emotions can influence one another during service encounters[7]. Earlier work by S. Douglas Pugh found that employees' displayed positive emotion was associated with customers' feelings and evaluations of service quality[8]. Yet a study by Patricia Barger and Alicia Grandey complicates the easy narrative: although customer and employee smiles were linked through mimicry, customer satisfaction in that study was better explained through evaluations of service quality than through a simple transfer of mood[9].

That nuance matters. A beautiful smile cannot rescue a broken registration system. Friendly copy cannot make up for a confusing customer journey. And a beautifully designed experience may still feel uncaring if people encounter one obstacle after another.

The human exchange and the operational one are connected. How we build the system changes the conditions under which people meet one another.

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Care Is Not the Same Thing as Performing Happiness

There is a danger in taking the language of good energy too literally, particularly in business. We begin asking people to be bright, warm, and positive on demand, regardless of what they are carrying. We mistake a cheerful performance for a caring environment.

A large meta-analysis by Ute Hülsheger and Anna Schewe examined decades of research on emotional labor. It found that surface acting—managing the outward appearance of emotion without necessarily feeling it—was associated with poorer well-being and less favorable job attitudes[10].

So the lesson cannot be "be positive so other people feel better." That places the responsibility for everyone's comfort on whoever has the least freedom to step away. A soul-led approach should do the opposite: build conditions where people can be honest, supported, well-prepared, and appropriately resourced.

Sometimes a compassionate encounter looks like enthusiasm. Sometimes it looks like silence, a clear answer, a boundary, a chair, a glass of water, an accessible website, or permission to rest.

Presence is not a performance. Care has to be supported by the way things are designed.

What This Changes About Business

Suppose someone is creating a course. We can count enrollments, open rates, and revenue. We should. Those numbers help sustain the work. But a participant also experiences the invitation, the payment process, the reminder email, the first session, the temperature of the room, the pace of the conversation, and the way questions are received.

Each part tells them something. Each part can either consume their attention or make room for what they came to experience. A beautifully produced offering is not simply one that looks polished. It is one where the experience has been considered from the other person's side.

That principle applies to leadership retreats, corporate programs, community events, classrooms, healthcare settings, and everyday service businesses. The question is not merely "Did we deliver it?" It is also "What was it like to be on the receiving end?"

And there is an internal version of the same question. What is it like to be one of the people delivering this experience? Do our teams have sufficient time, clear information, real authority, and room to be human? Or are we asking them to compensate emotionally for systems that were never designed to work?

Exchange Is More Than a Transaction

We exchange money for goods and services, of course. But we also exchange attention, confidence, frustration, relief, anticipation, reassurance, and meaning. Some of these exchanges are deliberate. Many are not. Their consequences are shaped by context and cannot all be measured or predicted.

Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory proposes that positive emotions can widen the range of actions and ideas people consider, supporting the development of longer-term resources[11]. It is not a promise that one warm exchange changes a life. It does make room for a serious possibility: a positive

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experience can alter what someone feels able to do next.

Maybe a participant walks out of a workshop more confident. Maybe a customer comes away feeling seen. Maybe an employee finishes a difficult day with enough support left to meet the people at home with more patience. We cannot claim these outcomes from every interaction. But the possibility is reason enough to treat encounters as consequential.

A Spiritual Understanding of the Same Encounter

For me, the language of energy exchange also points toward oneness: the belief that we are participants in one shared existence, continually shaping the world we experience together. This is a spiritual perspective, not an experimental conclusion. Its value is the responsibility it asks us to consider.

If the person before me is part of the same human world I inhabit, then the way I attend to them is not a side issue. The work becomes another way to practice how I want to participate in life.

This does not require every business to be spiritual, every meeting to be sacred, or every interaction to be profound. Often it is very ordinary. It is answering clearly. Building a process that makes sense. Making the room comfortable. Listening all the way through a sentence. Paying someone fairly. Leaving enough time for people to breathe.

The extraordinary thing may be how much the ordinary matters.

What Are People Carrying Away From an Encounter With You?

Here is the question I would invite every business owner, leader, facilitator, and creator to sit with: What does it feel like to encounter what I have made?

Not only the product. The process of getting to it. The people delivering it. The way the organization handles confusion, conflict, mistakes, or a request for help.

What are you asking your employees to carry? What are you making easier for customers? Where does care live in the structure rather than just the marketing language?

Energy exchange is one way to name the lived, felt dimension of those encounters. Psychology can illuminate several of its mechanisms. Somatic inquiry reminds us that the body participates. Spiritual philosophy asks us to consider the deeper implications of connection.

The three lenses are not identical. They do, however, invite a shared discipline: pay attention to what happens between us.

We do not simply move through one another's lives. We become part of one another's experience.

And that is reason enough to make the encounter count.

A few questions to take into your own organization

- What does a person feel at the first point of contact with your business, before they have paid you anything?

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- Which parts of your customer journey create clarity and ease, and which ask people to carry unnecessary work?
- What emotional labor does your team perform to make up for a process that should be redesigned?
- When someone leaves your event, course, meeting, or service, what might they carry into their next interaction?
- How could your systems make care more consistent, rather than leaving it to one particularly thoughtful employee?

NOTES & SOURCES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Micaela Redmond, LMT, CMP, PMP, Founder, EighteenFourteen

Micaela writes about consciousness, presence, somatic experience, and the ways we influence one another through our work and everyday lives. Her interdisciplinary perspective brings together decades of professional leadership, spiritual study, and doctoral study in Somatic Psychology.

Inquiries: micaelaredmond.com

Work with EighteenFourteen: eighteenfourteen.com · hello@eighteenfourteen.com

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