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Arlington Street Church

Empathy

What happens when we blur the distinction between ourselves and others – when we find ourselves feeling what another is feeling? This is empathy. It can be absolutely paralyzing, or it can surface what is humane in our humanity.

Sympathy is caring; compassion motivates us to help. Empathy is a deep dive into another's experience. Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another; listening with the ears of another; feeling with the heart of another.¹

Earlier this month, Kem & I taught a two-day course on animal rescue. On the first morning, she showed the film *Peaceable Kingdom*. In one scene, a farm is condemned and all the animals must be removed. Local farmers come with every manner of vehicle, trying to load them up to save them. In the chaos, two ewes are separated from their lambs.

In the next scene, the ewes are standing at the edge of their new pasture, bleating and lowing pitifully. They have been there for three days, calling for their babies. Tears spring to my eyes. I cannot imagine their heartache – and if I ever doubted that sheep would feel the way I might feel, their plaintive keening tells the heartrending truth.

And then a truck pulls up. The farmers, also deeply distressed by this scene, have called all over the county, looking for the lost sheep. And they've found them. The tailgate is opened, and fluffy white lambs leap into the air. The ewes come running, they find their respective babies, and for the first time in three days, their voices change from piercing cries to low, comforting bleating. And now I'm really crying, so grateful to the humans

¹ Paul S. Bellet and Michael J. Maloney, "The importance of empathy as an interviewing skill in medicine," in *JAMA*, 10/2/91. Please see jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/392335

for reuniting these families. As a bonus, two extra little lambs, apparently motherless, are immediately integrated into the fold.

Empathy is so painful. And then, when we choose to do the right thing, it's so freeing.²

Here in the United States, we cherish our individualism. Competition, striving to be the best, and winning are highly valued; this behavior equates to success. We don't question it. But what standing out and being a star requires of us takes a big bite out of our humanity, and our happiness.

A theory stood for a long time that humans are innately selfish. We now know that that is simply not true. We are born wired for social connectedness. And it turns out that empathy – that capacity to put ourselves in each other's places and really feel what that feels like – is key to happiness.

“All the latest neurological research shows that humans [derive] more happiness from cooperating with others than from winning alone. Scientists have discovered the ‘social brain,’ which lights up to show that we are driven by something beyond self-interest: [It has been proven that] caring relationships are one of the biggest predictors of happiness, well above [having] money.”³

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² “... Most people assume that empathy is the ability to “walk in other people’s shoes” as it were. So when you empathize with someone in a negative state, the logic follows, you’d increase your stress instead of decreasing it.

But the opposite is actually true.

Those who lack the ability to empathize often pick up the stress of others without knowing why - a concept that researchers call “second-hand stress”. And if you think it’s rare, think again. Researchers found that stress spread just as quickly as common cold does.

There are two reasons for the spread of second-hand stress

*Anxiety – if you don’t know why your spouse is depressed, for example, you will be under stress to find out.

*Mirror neurons – these are special brain cells that allows us to mimic what others are feeling, subconsciously.

And because empathy involves understanding what others are going through (which is a conscious activity), those who do it well are resistant to the negative influence of second-hand stress – and therefore saving themselves from all its health implications. ~ Charles Poladian, *The Surprising Health Effects of Empathy*, Medical Daily, 6/26/12. Please see medicaldaily.com/surprising-health-effects-empathy-240983

³ Katie Hintz-Zambrano, “What Danish Parents Know About Teaching Empathy,” in *Mother* (magazine), 8/3/15. Please see mothermag.com/teaching-empathy-to-children/

Last week, Kem & I took 16 teenagers on a service trip to Best Friends Animal Sanctuary in Kanab, Utah. There are 1,700 rescued animals in residence; there's a lot of cleaning up to do. But one of the most important volunteer jobs is to socialize the animals. Until their arrival in Angel Canyon, they have suffered egregiously at the hands of humans.

At the end of a shift in Dog Town, eight kids are ushered into a huge, empty, fenced yard. They are told by the staff to be seated to allow dogs to approach them, to make no sudden movements, to remain calm and peaceful. Suddenly, the kennel doors are opened and dogs, dogs, dogs come pouring out. Despite everything that has happened to them, most of them make a beeline for the kids, who speak to them in low voices, waiting for a sign from them that it's all right to pet them. They don't wait long; the dogs nuzzle them, lick their faces, plop down in the red clay dirt next to them, or in their laps, wanting attention and affection.

In the midst of their glee, though, the kids are keenly aware that there are two dogs who have not come to them. They know not to look at these two, so as not to awaken aggression in them. These dogs are newcomers to the sanctuary, strays who have had to fight for their lives and have known no human kindness until they were brought to Best Friends. They are pacing the fence line, panting, drooling, frantic. The kids are obviously distressed by the raw fear in the new rescues and all that it means, but they just keep petting the dogs who have settled in with them, exuding kindness.

And then there is a moment – perhaps the moment when a critical mass of empathy fills the desert air – when the new arrivals somehow sense they are safe and suddenly both sit down. There is an almost imperceptible sigh of relief, a shared knowledge that we have all – humans and dogs alike – experienced the first moment of healing for these two. Later that evening, the kids universally report that that moment was the high point of their day.

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Empathy. Possibly from the German *Einfühlun*, meaning “feeling into,” the word is only about a hundred years old, but it has awakened significant interest in its moral implications.⁴

⁴ Paul Bloom, “The Baby in the Well: The Case Against Empathy,” *The New Yorker*, 5/20/13. Please see newyorker.com/magazine/2013/05/20/the-baby-in-the-well

In August of 2006, President Obama gave the commencement address at Xavier University in New Orleans. Just months before, in the days after Hurricane Katrina, nearly 400 Xavier students and faculty were trapped on a roof, waiting for rescuers with a sign that said “Help Us.” At the beginning of their senior year, this class had been forced to scatter to schools across the country; that January, against all odds, their remarkable president, Norman Francis, had overseen the reopening of Xavier.

President Obama tells them, “... Today and every day, you have a responsibility to remember what happened here in New Orleans.... [to] allow it to change you forever.” He asks them to address what he calls the “empathy deficit.” It’s a difficult path, he says. “It asks more of you.... It asks you to recognize that there are people out there who need you.... When you think like this – when you choose to broaden your ambit of concern and empathize with the plight of others ... it becomes harder not to act; harder not to help.

“... Remember always that while many in Washington ... failed New Orleans,” President Obama concludes, “there were plenty of ordinary people who displayed extraordinary humanity during this city’s hour of need.... In the years to come, return this favor to those who are forced to weather their own storms.”⁵

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In 2010, two important books on empathy were published, championing the empathy cure for society’s ills. Paul Ehrlich and Robert Ornstein’s *Humanity on a Tightrope* and Jeremy Rifkin’s *The Empathetic Civilization* both “make the powerful argument that empathy has been the main driver of human progress, and that we need more of it if our species is to survive.

“Ehrlich and Ornstein want us ‘to emotionally join a global family.’ Rifkin calls ... us to make the leap to ‘global empathic consciousness;’ he sees this as the last, best hope for saving the world from environmental destruction, and concludes with the plaintive question, ‘Can we reach

⁵ President Barack Obama, Xavier University Commencement Address, New Orleans, LA, 8/11/06. You want to make the time to read the entire text here: obamaspeeches.com/087-Xavier-University-Commencement-Address-Obama-Speech.htm

biosphere consciousness and global empathy in time to avoid planetary collapse?”⁶

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In early August of 2015, sisters Yusra and Sarah Mardini, ages 17 and 20, fled their home in Damascus, joining a wave of Syrian refugees escaping the war. They made their way to Lebanon and on to Turkey, where they paid smugglers to take them to Greece. At dusk one evening, twenty people crowded onto a small inflatable dinghy built for six. Within half an hour, the motor failed, and the boat began taking on water. All but four of the passengers couldn't swim.

They pitched their bags overboard as the wind churned up the Aegean Sea. Conditions worsened. Yusra, Sarah, and the other swimmers jumped into the water, hoping to give the boat more buoyancy.⁷ They spent three and a half hours in the water, pushing the boat to land, saving the lives of all twenty people and getting them safely to Lesbos.

The sisters went on to travel through Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria, before reaching Germany, where Yusra Mardini joined a Berlin swim team and went on to qualify and swim for the Refugee Team at the Olympic Games in Rio.

“I want everyone to think refugees are normal people,” she says, “who had their homelands and lost them, not because they wanted to run away and be refugees, but because they [wanted to live and] had dreams in their lives and they had to go.”⁸

This past fall, Sarah returned to Lesbos, where she serves as a volunteer lifeguard,⁹ scanning the horizon of the Aegean through binoculars, searching for dinghies carrying refugees from Turkey. “She works in a team

⁶ Paul Bloom, *op cit*

⁷ Merrit Kennedy, “A Team of Refugees Will Compete at the Olympic Games in Rio,” *NPR.org*, 3/3/16. Please see npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/03/03/469044261/in-a-first-team-of-refugees-will-compete-at-the-olympic-games

⁸ Please see independent.co.uk/news/people/yusra-mardini-rio-2016-olympics-womens-swimming-the-syrian-refugee-competing-in-the-olympics-who-a7173546.html

⁹ Sarah volunteers with Greece's Emergency Response Centre International (ERCI), a non-profit humanitarian organization that assists refugees in distress as they attempt to reach the island.

of four: rescuer, skipper, medic, and translator. Out on the water, Sarah is often the one who calms refugees, many of whom cannot swim.

“I talk them through it. I tell them, ‘I know what you feel because I’ve been through it. I lived it, and I survived,’” she says. “And they feel better because I am a refugee, just like them.”¹⁰

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Most people feel an aversion to empathy. The sheer magnitude of suffering can be overwhelming; immobilizing. But, again, caring and connection and kindness are by far the happier choice.

One more story:

At Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, you can bring home a rescued animal to spend the night in your cabin, to give them an opportunity for socialization and to give you the fun of a sleepover. On the first evening, I went to Dog Town headquarters to pick up an overnight guest for the kids. The woman behind the desk offered me a dog named Bagel – a very nice mixed-breed who will almost certainly be adopted very soon. I knew the kids would love Bagel, but I asked her if she had a dog who might not be the first one out. She told me there was a black Mastiff mix named Bull, who had been found wandering on the nearby Navajo reservation. Bull had been used for target practice, she said. He was full of buckshot. You could feel it in his back, and in his ear. No one ever chooses to take Bull for the night.

On behalf of the kids, I chose Bull.

As we pulled up to where they were waiting, Bull – a little anxious and very excited – hopped out of the van and was instantly enveloped in sixteen pairs of arms. The kids’ outrage over what had happened to him was outstripped only by their empathy. *Can you imagine?* they asked. *He must have been so frightened.* Everyone wanted to hold his leash. Everyone wanted to throw his toys and rub his belly and feed him treats. Everyone wanted him to sleep in their bed. Bull and the kids spent a fabulous night together. And today, if you go to the Best Friends website, you’ll find Bull up for adoption.¹¹

¹⁰ Tania Karas and Achilleas Zavallist, “Syrian Refugee Uses Swimming Skills to Rescue Others,” *UNHCR* website, December 27, 2016. Please see unhcr.org/news/stories/2016/12/585b9b464/syrian-refugee-uses-swimming-skills-rescue-others.html

¹¹ Please see BestFriends.org/adopt/adopt-our-sanctuary/10705397/Bull

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Beloved spiritual companions,

Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another;
listening with the ears of another;
feeling with the heart of another –
a deep dive
into another's experience.

Let us give our hearts to the underdog.
Let us strive to make the leap
to global empathic consciousness.

Empathy can be paralyzing,
or it can surface what is humane in our humanity.
Cooperation, caring, connection, and kindness
are the biggest predictors of happiness.

May we choose empathy.
May we choose happiness.