

The Empathy Paradox

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When I was about 13, my father and I were walking home together. We would have made quite a sight. Because of his polio he walked rather slowly with a pronounced gimp. To keep his pace I unconsciously would walk along side him with the same gait. I can't remember what prompted his comment, but he said to me, "Clay, I don't think you should ever become a dentist." Surprised by this seeming *non sequitur*, I asked why. "Because you are extremely empathetic." Having no clue, I asked what that meant. "If you were a dentist, every time you drilled into a person's tooth it would feel like your own." That was a convincing argument so I rejected that career in favour of one where I could avoid people's fear, pain, grief and distress... yeah right!

Since remembering that long ago interchange and deciding to talk about the paradox of empathy this morning, I have come upon another good reason for not choosing that particular vocation. A dentist killed Cecil the lion. If the uproar on social media is any indication, most of the world empathises with lions a whole lot more than with big game hunting dentists. There seems to be general consensus that it is his head that should be mounted on a wall, not Cecil's, revealing the paradox of empathy. We don't empathise with everyone. It is not applied universally or equally and can be distracting from more important issues and demands, yet we know it is critical to civilised society.

In 2008, Karina Encarnacion, an eight year-old girl from Missouri, wrote to President-elect Barack Obama with some advice about what kind of dog he should get for his daughters. She also suggested that he enforce recycling and ban unnecessary wars. Obama wrote to thank her, and offered some advice of his own: "If you don't already know what it means, I want you to look up the word 'empathy' in the dictionary. I believe we don't have enough empathy in our world today, and it is up to your generation to change that."

This wasn't the first time Obama had spoken up for empathy. Two years earlier, in a commencement address, he discussed the importance of being able "to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us—the child who's hungry, the steelworker who's been laid off, the family who lost the entire life they built together when the storm came to town." He went on, "When you think like this—when you choose to broaden your ambit of concern and empathise with the plight of others, whether they are close friends or distant strangers—it becomes harder not to act, harder not to help."

The word "empathy"—a rendering of a German word meaning "feeling into"—is only a century old, but people have been interested for a long time in the moral implications of feeling our way into the lives of others. In 1759, Adam Smith observed that sensory experience alone could not spur us toward sympathetic engagement with others: "Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers." For Smith, what made us moral beings was the imaginative capacity to "place ourselves in his situation . . . and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something, which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them."

In this sense, empathy is an instinctive mirroring of others' experience—James Bond gets his testicles mashed in "Casino Royale," and male moviegoers grimace and cross their legs. Smith talks of how "persons of delicate fibres" who notice a beggar's sores and ulcers "are apt to feel an itching or uneasy sensation in the correspondent part of their own bodies." There is now widespread support, in the social sciences, for what the psychologist C. Daniel Batson calls "the empathy-altruism hypothesis." Batson has found that simply instructing his subjects to take another's perspective made them more caring and more likely to help.

Empathy research is thriving these days in the cognitive neurosciences. There is increasing focus on the emotions, especially those involved in moral thought and action. We've learned, for instance, that some of the same neural systems that are active when we are in pain become

engaged when we observe the suffering of others. Other researchers are exploring how empathy emerges in chimpanzee and other primates. On the less scientific side, there are countless animal videos on Facebook demonstrating our fascination with cross-species empathetic interaction.

This interest isn't just theoretical. If we can figure out how empathy works, we might be able to produce more of it. Perhaps then we could reduce acts of terror, mass killings, inequality, destruction of the environment and oppressions of all kinds, beginning with patriarchy, racism, and neoliberal capitalism.

Emily Bazelon, in *Sticks and Stones*, her book on bullying, writes, "The scariest aspect of bullying is the utter lack of empathy"—a diagnosis that she applies not only to the bullies but also to those who do nothing to help the victims. Few of those involved in bullying, she cautions, will turn into full-blown psychopaths. Rather, the empathy gap is situational: bullies have come to see their victims as worthless; they have chosen to shut down their empathetic responses. But most will outgrow—and perhaps regret—their terrible behaviour. "The key is to remember that almost everyone has the capacity for empathy and decency—and to tend that seed as best as we possibly can," she maintains.

Jeremy Rifkin in his book *The Empathic Civilization* and Paul Ehrlich and Robert Ornstein in *Humanity on a Tightrope* 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 for 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 biosphere consciousness and global empathy in time to avoid planetary collapse?" As befits the spirit of the times, they enthusiastically champion an increase in empathy as a cure for humanity's ills.

This enthusiasm may be misplaced, however. Empathy has some unfortunate features—it is parochial, narrow-minded, and disproportionate. We're often at our best when we're smart enough not to rely on it.

In 1949, Kathy Fiscus, a three-year-old girl, fell into a well in San Marino, California, and all America was captivated by concern. Four decades later, America was transfixed by the plight of Jessica McClure—Baby Jessica—the eighteen-month-old who fell into a narrow well in Texas, in October, 1987, triggering a fifty-eight-hour rescue operation. "Everybody in America became godmothers and godfathers of Jessica while this was going on," President Reagan remarked.

The immense power of empathy has been demonstrated again and again. It's why, in the wake of widely reported tragedies and disasters—the Red Cross and other aid agencies raise huge sums of money.

Why do people respond to some misfortunes and not to others? Each day, more than ten times the number of people who died in Hurricane Katrina die because of preventable diseases, and more than thirteen times as many perish from malnutrition.

There is, of course, the attention-getting power of news events. Just as we can come to ignore the hum of traffic, we become oblivious of problems that seem unrelenting, like the starvation of children in Africa—or homicide in the United States. In the past three decades in America, there were some sixty mass shootings, causing about five hundred deaths; that is, about one-tenth of one per cent of the homicides in America. But mass murders get splashed onto television screens, newspaper headlines, and the Web; the biggest ones settle into our collective memory—Columbine, Virginia Tech, Aurora, Sandy Hook and now Charleston.

The 99.9 per cent of other homicides are, unless the victim is someone you've heard of, mere background noise. It is refreshing to live in a country where the rarity of such events makes every gun death newsworthy.

The key to engaging empathy is what has been called “the identifiable victim effect.” You can see the effect in the lab. The psychologists Tehila Kogut and Ilana Ritov asked some subjects how much money they would give to help develop a drug that would save the life of one child, and asked others how much they would give to save eight children. The answers were about the same. But when they told a third group a child's name and age, and showed her picture, the donations shot up far greater than what would be given to save the eight.

The number of victims hardly matters—there is little psychological difference between hearing about the suffering of five thousand and that of five hundred thousand. Imagine reading that two thousand people just died in an earthquake in a remote country, and then discovering that the actual number of deaths was twenty thousand. Do you now feel ten times worse? To the extent that we can recognize the numbers as significant, it's because of reason, not empathy.

In the broader context of humanitarianism, as critics like Linda Polman have pointed out, the empathetic reflex can lead us astray. When the perpetrators of violence profit from aid—as in the “taxes” that warlords often demand from international relief agencies—they are actually given an incentive to commit further atrocities. It is similar to the practice of some parents in India who mutilate their children at birth in order to make them more effective beggars. The children's debilities tug at our hearts, but a more dispassionate analysis of the situation is necessary if we are going to do anything meaningful to prevent the practice of mutilation.

A “politics of empathy” doesn't provide much clarity in the public sphere, either. Typically, political disputes involve a disagreement over who has the greatest claim to our empathy. Presently our government is considering stronger health and safety laws in the work place. However, they want to water them down for small businesses because they empathise with farmers and small businesses who argue the law will be onerous for them. Labour unions and left of centre political parties object, as does the occasional Unitarian minister. Recently I participated in an action at John Key's office in Kumeu putting up 290 crosses in front of it. Why 290? The Pike River Mine disaster, which filled all New Zealanders with grief, killed 29 miners. Since then ten times that number have died in the workplace, and small businesses have the worst record. Sadly, most died in anonymity. I empathise with those families left traumatised and bereft by the death of those 290 loved ones.

On many issues, empathy can pull us in the wrong direction. The outrage that comes from adopting the perspective of a victim can drive an appetite for retribution. But the appetite for retribution is typically indifferent to long-term consequences. In one study, conducted by Jonathan Baron and Ilana Ritov, people were asked how best to punish a company for producing a vaccine that caused the death of a child. Some were told that a higher fine would make the company work harder to manufacture a safer product; others were told that a higher fine would discourage the company from making the vaccine, and since there were no acceptable alternatives on the market the punishment would lead to more deaths. Most people didn't care; they wanted the company fined heavily, whatever the consequence.

This dynamic regularly plays out in the realm of criminal justice. In 1987, Willie Horton, a convicted murderer who had been released on furlough from the Northeastern Correctional Center, in Massachusetts, raped a woman after beating and tying up her fiancé. The furlough program came to be seen as a humiliating mistake on the part of Governor Michael Dukakis, and was used against him by his opponents during his run for President, the following year. Yet the program may have reduced the likelihood of such incidents. A 1987 report found that the recidivism rate in Massachusetts dropped in the eleven years after the program was

introduced, and that convicts who were furloughed before being released were less likely to go on to commit a crime than those who were not. The trouble is that you can't point to individuals who weren't raped, assaulted, or killed as a result of the programme, just as you can't point to a specific person whose life was spared because of vaccination.

The failure of our government to enact prudent long-term policies such as supporting renewable energy generation in communities like Greymouth and Westport that rely on coal mining for jobs is often attributed to the incentive system of democratic politics, which favours short-term fixes, and to the powerful influence of money. But the politics of empathy is also to blame. Too often, our concern for specific individuals today means neglecting crises that will harm countless people in the future.

Moral judgment entails more than putting oneself in another's shoes. As the philosopher Jesse Prinz points out, some acts that we easily recognize as wrong, such as shoplifting or tax evasion, have no identifiable victim. And plenty of good deeds—disciplining a child for dangerous behaviour, enforcing a fair and impartial procedure for determining who should get an organ transplant, despite the suffering of those low on the list—require us to put our empathy to one side. Eight deaths are worse than one, even if you know the name of the one; humanitarian aid can, if poorly targeted, be counterproductive; the threat posed by climate change warrants the sacrifices entailed by efforts to ameliorate it. “The decline of violence may owe something to an expansion of empathy,” the psychologist Steven Pinker has written, “but it also owes much to harder-boiled faculties like prudence, reason, fairness, self-control, norms and taboos, and conceptions of human rights.” A reasoned, even counter-empathetic analysis of moral obligation and likely consequences is a better guide to planning for the future than the gut wrench of empathy.

Rifkin and others have argued, plausibly, that moral progress involves expanding our concern from the family and the tribe to humanity as a whole. Yet it is impossible to empathize with seven billion strangers, or to feel toward someone you've never met the degree of concern you feel for a child, a friend, or a lover. Our best hope for the future is not to get people to think of all humanity as family—that's impossible. It lies, instead, in an appreciation of the fact that, even if we don't empathize with distant strangers, their lives have the same value as the lives of those we love.

That's not a call for a world without empathy. Reason may guide us to know what's right, but empathy motivates us to act upon it. Empathy converts intelligence into action.

Where empathy really does matter is in our personal relationships. Empathy is what makes us human; it's what makes us both subjects and objects of moral concern. Empathy betrays us only when we take it as a moral guide. If we rely only on empathy we are at risk of behaving morally primarily to those who resemble us in background, looks, or character (that is, people who seem moral and deserving just like we assume we are) and not to people who are different, odd, or potentially at fault. As Unitarians we are better off trusting our seven principles to guide our actions than how well we can identify with the feelings of another.

Such are the paradoxes of empathy. The power of this faculty has something to do with its ability to focus our moral concern. If a planet of billions is to survive, however, we'll need to take into consideration the welfare of people not yet harmed—and, even more, of people not yet born. They have no names, faces, or stories to grip our conscience or stir our feelings of compassion. Their prospects call, rather, for deliberation and calculation. Our hearts will always go out to the baby in the well and Cecil the lion; it's a measure of our humanity. But empathy will have to yield to reason if humanity is to have a future.