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Thoughts on Empathy

“Humans aren’t as good as we should be in our capacity to empathize with feelings and thoughts of others, be they humans or other animals on Earth. So maybe part of our formal education should be training in empathy. Imagine how different the world would be if, in fact, that were ‘reading, writing, arithmetic, empathy.’” ~ Neil deGrasse Tyson

Empathy is known as the ability to share or feel the emotional experiences of another person. In fact, empathy is a complex function that is differentiated in at least two important ways: cognitive empathy and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy is widely known as the ability of one person to take the perspective of, and understand the emotional experience of, another person. Affective empathy describes the ability of an individual to share the emotions or emotional experience of another person; it refers to the process of emotionally matching another person’s response, or even feeling distress when another person is in distress.

When we think of what type of human interaction comforts the most, we often hear people say that being understood or “heard” is high on the list. The people in our lives who listen and truly hear us are people with whom we feel loved and cared for. Their concern comforts us because they “get” us, and they do this without judgement or “fixing.” Those who can listen and provide space and time for another person’s suffering create opportunities for empathy.

Lack of empathic concern, on the other hand, is hurtful and harmful. Those who lack empathy routinely run roughshod over the feelings of others, sometimes without realizing it. Lack of empathy combined with intention to harm is highly concerning because people with that combination of traits are those who can be callous or worse, dangerous to others.

When a person, or a group of people feels anguish, this is a clarion call for empathy. Like so many of you, I have been thinking about the recent deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. and the devastation brought on by those losses. Like so many of you, I have been thinking about decades and centuries of oppression that generate trauma and hurt for people of color, and the impact of this layered, complex and unremitting trauma on groups and individuals. I notice an awakening in some people as they grapple with concepts like “privilege” and “systemic racism.” I notice a step toward empathic concern as we reckon with the brutality of a nation where all are not protected equally.

An aspect of empathy that deserves attention is how it generates prosocial, or helpful, behavior by one individual toward another. Unlike sympathetic responses where a person “feels badly” for another or, further still, unlike in a response made to lower one’s own distress at seeing someone upset, true empathic concern is altruistic in nature. Empathy includes the desire to lower the distress level in others for the sake of helping another person, not for expedience or self-centered reasons.

Community conversations at Parker and elsewhere are exploring recent events, and we are encouraging students to try to make meaning of these events. Some community members are looking at ways that they can act. Students and families are engaging in peaceful protest, educating themselves, and talking with each other. Nationally, there is a shifting of hearts and minds as people discuss and try to understand the experiences of others. There are always negative stories of wanton violence or bad behavior, but there is great evidence that people are trying to understand and further, trying to help.

Who is the person in your life who helps you? Who in your life understands you, shows empathy, and provides support? Perhaps a better question asks: for whom are *you* the listener, the source of comfort and the truest friend? When are you most able to show care for another? Does empathy come naturally to you, or do you need to work at it? The good news is that empathy be taught. And, throughout the lifespan, levels of empathy in individuals can increase. The eternal optimist in me is heartened by knowing this. A little bit of empathy added by all of us to our world would create a mega-dose of love and concern for humanity. The world could sure use that right now.

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