

## Empathy Can Move Mountains

Adam Braun, CEO and founder of Pencils of Promise, recently spoke at Sonoma State University's graduation. He described his moment of enlightenment when, upon asking a young Indian boy what he desired out of anything in the whole world, he answered, "a pencil". That began a change of career course for him, from hedge funds to nonprofits, from building personal wealth to building schools for those in poverty. He urged the SSU graduates "not to follow their passions but their purpose" and go forward despite all the reasons others might give for potential failure.

Empathy is defined by Webster's as "intellectual or emotional identification with another". Adam Braun's empathy allowed him to understand the condition of that boy in such a way as to fuel a passion to change it, not only for him but for countless others. Empathy is a powerful force in a world of self-centeredness. In fact, it is so powerful that it underlies the therapeutic alliance between patient and therapist. Necessary work cannot proceed unless the patient feels understood and an "affective baseline" is shared (Havens, 1978). In fact, noted psychologist Carl Rogers emphasized an empathic stance as curative; the patient experiences a decrease of anxiety and more ability to engage with others when empathically "heard".

Empathy is also vital in healthy relationship. Those who lack empathy for others have a difficult time connecting. A couple who worked in therapy for several years were never able to overcome this issue. She saw her partner as deliberately opposing her expressed desires when he tried, again and again, to please her. He had all the symptoms of ADD but never had been diagnosed. She had no empathy for how this disorder affected his ability to follow through on tasks she set for him to accomplish in their home. The last time I saw him he was attending a meeting on plant care because she had repeatedly berated him for "massacring her flowers". Another client could not understand his wife's world of loneliness and constant search for connection with him while he spent long hours away at work. She raised their three children virtually alone and then filed for divorce: "I couldn't continue in a relationship where I received more empathy from the dog".

There has been much debate on whether empathy is learned or innate. A recent University of Virginia study measured brain activity on fMRI scans of students exposed to the threat of mild electrical shocks to themselves or to a friend or stranger. The brain

showed little activity to the threat of shock to a stranger but lit up when the threat was to a friend, virtually identically to the activity it displayed to a personal threat. The premise is that the brain is hardwired to empathize due to the close connection we feel towards loved ones and the evolutionary security it represents. Close connections expand our resources and resources extend our ability to survive in the world.

However, an innate capacity for empathy has been challenged by other studies that have found a decline in empathy over the past several decades. Researcher Sara Konrath of the University of Michigan collated self-reported empathy scores of nearly 14,000 college students in 2010 who rated themselves as less empathic than the average student had 30 years ago. Konrath attributes an increase in social isolation to the drop in empathy. In the past decades, Americans have become more likely to live alone and less inclined to join groups. Some researchers have been studying the effects of social media on increased isolation in interpersonal interaction. There is much anecdotal and burgeoning research evidence to support the use of texting and other social media as detrimental to relational satisfaction. A client came into session recently saying, “you’re going to have a big job coming with the next generation” after noticing a young child making frequent, unsuccessful bids for attention with her parents in the waiting room. Both were on cell phones.

Wherever empathy comes from, the world would not be the same without it. Mark Davis, psychologist and researcher at Eckerd College in Florida has spent 30 years studying empathy. He notes, “Imagine if humans didn’t have the capacity for empathy. What would it mean if we never gave a damn about what happened to other people? That’s an almost inconceivable world”. I agree. But I’m not giving up on this generation if people like Adam Braun are part of it.

P.S. For a wonderful example of inauthentic empathy, see the portrayal of Francis Underwood’s character in the Netflix series, “House of Cards”.

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