

On Empathy

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A six-year-old girl in nice clothes stands alone in the city of Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia. Strangers approach her to inquire who she is, if she's alright, where her parents might be.¹ Later, the same girl, now dressed like a ragamuffin, stands in the same spot. No one approaches her; she is ignored by the passersby. The scene switches to a restaurant, where the girl, once again neatly coiffed and dressed, takes a seat at the table of strangers. She is welcomed with questions of concern and invited to partake in the food. Same girl, again in the role of street urchin, enters the same restaurant and sits at a stranger's table. She is shooed away, and eventually is asked to leave the place.

I am appalled. Why were these people able to empathize with the little girl when she was nicely dressed, and be so callous to her when she was not? What are the triggers of empathy? What are its obstacles?

Here in Transylvania County, what changes in appearance might make us less or more likely to be the receivers or the givers of empathy?

What is empathy, after all?

Of the many understandings of this concept that I found through a cursory google search, my favorite is perhaps the one attributed to Alfred Adler: Empathy is "seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another." In other words, empathy requires that we put ourselves within the frame of reference of the other. It would appear, then, that empathy is impossible without imagination. As a father and grandfather, it was not hard for me to imagine my loved ones in the place of the little girl in the video. And yet, would I be equally likely to empathize with her if I had seen her in real life in the city of Tbilisi, rather than framed within a video, particularly if the sight of street urchins were not uncommon in that foreign city?

¹<http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=video+little+girl+empathy+tbilisi&adlt=strict&view=detail&mid=9CCE1CF0F5BEB59EDCB79CCE1CF0F5BEB59EDCB7&FORM=VRDGAR>

Is imagination enough or is it rather a prerequisite of empathy, necessary but insufficient? I believe that Frederick Buechner gets it right when he comments on the Golden Rule: “If we are to love our neighbors as ourselves we must **see** our neighbors. With our imagination as well as with our eyes, that is to say like artists, we must see not just their faces but the life behind and within their faces. **Here it is love that is the frame we see them in.**”²

Thus, it would seem that empathy is a form of imagination framed by love. Now, let us not be confused. We are not talking here about a sentimental, touchy-feely love, but rather about a kind of love that is a resolve, a will, a determination to approach the other with fairness, respect and compassion.

Is there anything new in this; anything we don’t already know? I dare say that most of us, if not all, have been brought up in one or another version of Christianity. As such, aren’t we inheritors of a tradition that puts the other, especially the suffering other, at the very center of our faith? Is there anyone here who would dispute the centrality of empathic love to the Christian faith? Why are we then, over 2,000 years after Jesus’ witness, so far from living the Golden Rule? What part of “love your neighbor as yourself” have we not understood? How could this faith devolve into indifference and cynicism; worse yet, into the horrific display of hate by groups like the Westboro Baptist Church, whose official website is *godhatesfags.com*?

Note how *hate* places itself between *God* and *fags*, between God and this other whom the members of this church cannot understand, whose very identity they have reduced to a four-letter word, in whose place they are unable to put themselves. There is no resolve here to stand before the other with fairness, respect and compassion.

Even presuming the best of intentions, there are still major obstacles to empathy. A first could be an insufficiency of imagination; the incapacity to put ourselves in the place of the other. Another

² <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2016/4/29/we-must-see-our-neighbors>

could be what I would call the *reduction* of the other, be it by belittling or even demonizing, thus depriving the other of all nuance, all complexity, all mystery. Yet another obstacle might be the *magnification* of the self. Reduction can express itself in many guises. When we dismiss an individual by reducing him or her to a certain class, race or group we are indeed belittling that person, depriving her or him of all nuance and complexity as an individual. Muslim, Black, White Trash, Hick, Fag, Spick are only some of the labels at our disposal.

Argentinian philosopher/theologian Enrique Dussel can help us to understand the error involved in depriving the other of mystery and complexity.

In his *The Philosophy of Liberation*³, Dussel invites us to distinguish between the concepts of “world” and “cosmos.” *Cosmos* refers to the totality of that which is or exists regardless of whether we know it or are even capable of knowing it. The concept of *world*, however, is everything that is or exists within the horizon of our culturally determined and personal reality; everything that we know or think we know. To the average person, quarks, muons, neutrinos, the elusive Higgs boson are all in the realm of the cosmos, although within the horizon of understanding of a few nerdy physicists. Everything that we can see in this room is part of the realm of our world. Should we transport this room in its entirety to some distant place and bring into it a group of natives who had never had contact with our world, they would most likely feel like they had entered a bizarre, exotic, mysterious realm. To them, this room would belong, at least initially, to Dussel’s concept of cosmos.

Building on these understandings of *cosmos* and *world*, Dussel reformulates the concept of *metaphysical* or *transcendental* as referring not to that which lies beyond the cosmos, but rather to that which lies beyond or transcends our culturally and personally defined world. In the arena of theology then, the metaphysical, the transcendental is not what lies out there in the vast perhaps unknowable

³ Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985.

reaches of the cosmos, but that which appears to us from without our world. The encounter between Native Americans and Europeans in the late fifteenth century was such a transcendental moment. Neither the Native Americans nor the Europeans had the tools to place themselves within the frame of reference of the other. Thus, the ones simply assimilated the others within the confines of their own world. The Europeans belittled the Native Americans, reducing them to savages. And the latter sometimes saw gods in the Europeans. We all know the tragic, bloody outcomes of this encounter.

Dussel looks to his Christian faith to ponder the spiritual significance of such encounters. For a faith that affirms the mystery of the Incarnation, of a God who adopts the frame of reference of humanity, a God who empathizes with humanity to the point of becoming a human being, such encounters are transcendental. He refers to them as “the epiphany of the other,” and affirms that there is not a more metaphysically pregnant occasion than this one. In other words, everything is at stake when we come face to face with another human being! God is not to be found out there in the unknowable reaches of the *cosmos*, but rather much closer, in that very difficult to bridge horizon beyond our cultural, personal or internal *world*, beyond the self, beyond the ego.

Before another human being, regardless of culture, ethnicity, gender, faith, we must struggle to understand that he or she is every bit as real as we are, and we must act accordingly. It would appear then that empathy would be out of reach for the narcissist. Psychologist Erich Fromm makes this explicit: “The narcissistic orientation,” he says, “is one in which one experiences as real only that which exists within oneself.”⁴ Thus, to the narcissist the self is the measure, the criterion, the filter of all reality. Narcissism is the ultimate magnification of the self.

The narcissist is blinded by the clarity with which he perceives everything. There is no mystery to ponder, no hesitation or reticence to consider. There is no introspection, because the narcissist has no

⁴ Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving.

doubt about the self. The self is the measure of all things, a measure applied without hesitation in the appraisal of the other.

Now, before we gleefully rush to identify all of the narcissists that we know, be advised that there is, at the very least, a little narcissist in all of us! To use Peggy McIntosh's metaphor, we all carry an invisible knapsack in which are packed all kinds of norms, views and assumptions about ourselves and others, as well as unexamined privileges.⁵

There are many, many forms of otherness; and thus many, many occasions to test our capacity for empathy. This is not just an issue of ethnicity, religion, race or gender; it seems to be a human condition that may well reach way back to our tribal past or even be rooted in the very origin of the self. Isn't the other, after all, the looking glass for the construction of the self? Don't we always define ourselves in opposition to the other? No, the other does not have to be someone from an antagonistic group or from some exotic culture; the other can even be our brother, as attested in the ancient story of Abel and Cain!

My doctoral dissertation was a theological reading of four novels by Haitian author, Marie Vieux Chauvet. Many who asked what I was writing about were bewildered by the information conveyed in my previous sentence. Some asked "from which Asian country?" And I had to clarify: *Haitian*, as in Haiti, not *Asian*, as in China or Mongolia! Others, like a group of young Dominican students I met at an academic conference in Quebec, readily understood what I meant by *Haitian*, but could not conceal their amazement at the notion that Haitians could read and write at all, never mind well enough for anyone to study their literature.

During the research process, I discovered that there is in Haiti a hierarchy of color that entails all sorts of privileges and prejudices. The ideal in this hierarchy is to look as white as possible while still

⁵ <http://nationalseedproject.org/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack>

having black blood. Ironically, it is this black blood that entitles you to an identity as a Haitian. In Haitian Creole, the word for “man” is “nèg,” which is the same word for “negro”!!!

Regardless of the role black blood plays in the very identity of a Haitian, however, the ideal carried in their knapsacks is light skin and straight hair. You may imagine, thus, how offended the elite light-skinned mulattoes were during the American Occupation (1915-1934), when the invaders failed to distinguish them from ordinary blacks and to allow them into their social clubs! Yet, many of these light-skinned mulattoes could readily turn around and look at their darker brothers and sisters with contempt!

It can be rather dizzying, this capacity of ours to turn around and look at a person with disdain while being ourselves at the receiving end of someone else’s contempt!

It would seem then that the *knapsack* we all carry is not some secondary addition, but rather an integral part of our very humanity. Addressing the issue of “white privilege,” in a long, thoughtful response to a white friend who would like to know what white privilege really is, Lori Lakin Hutcherson, Editor-in-Chief of *Good Black News*, produces a list of examples. One of these is related to her experience as a young black girl who has just been admitted to Harvard University. She identifies three separate encounters with white strangers that still annoy her to this day:

The first was the white doctor giving me a physical at Kaiser:

Me: “I need to send an immunization report to my college so I can matriculate.”

Doctor: “Where are you going?”

Me: “Harvard.”

Doctor: “You mean the one in Massachusetts?”

The second was in a store, looking for supplies I needed from Harvard’s suggested “what to bring with you” list.

Store employee: “Where are you going?”

Me: “Harvard.”

Store employee: “You mean the one in Massachusetts?”

The third was at UPS, shipping off boxes of said “what to bring” to Harvard. I was in line behind a white boy mailing boxes to Princeton, and in front of a white woman sending her child’s boxes to wherever. Woman, to the boy: “What college are you going to?”

Boy: “Princeton.”

Woman: “Congratulations!”

Woman, to me: “Where are you sending your boxes?”

Me: "Harvard."

Woman: "You mean the one in Massachusetts?"

I think: "No,... the one downtown next to the liquor store." But I say, gesturing to my

LABELED boxes: "Yes, the one in Massachusetts."

Then she says congratulations but it's too... late. The point here is **if no one has ever questioned your intellectual capabilities or attendance at an elite institution based solely on your skin color, that is white privilege.**⁶

You may think of yourself as the nicest, least racist and most compassionate white person in the world, and maybe you are, but you will never stand in that line and hear the teller ask if the Harvard that you will be attending is the one in Massachusetts.

Yes, you will never stand in a line in which your blackness makes the teller incredulous about your admission to Harvard. But, you might stand in another line, a line in which the two persons in front of you are wearing "Brevard" Tee-shirts, whereas your tee-shirt reads "Rosman" instead. What might be the response of the teller in this situation? Have you been in that line?

However relevant it may be to any conversation about empathy in this country today, the race issue is at least in the forefront of the national debate. But, what about the social class issue? I find it interesting to note how this issue is almost a taboo here! It seems to run against our deepest sense of nationhood. This is the *Land of Opportunity!* To speak of social class is counterintuitive in a country that holds as a self-evident truth that we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. And yet, the truth is that we need to be vigilant of the operations of *class privilege*, as well as the operations of *white privilege*. Because there are many in this country and in the world—Black, White, Christian, Non-Christian—who carry in their knapsacks all sorts of assumptions and privileges that are simply not available to the poor.

What sorts of unexamined norms, expectations and privileges do we, citizens of Transylvania County, carry in our knapsacks? What kinds of encounters with others do we experience that would test our capacity for empathy?

⁶ <https://goodblacknews.org/2016/07/14/editorial-what-i-said-when-my-white-friend-asked-for-my-black-opinion-on-white-privilege/>

One such encounter might be between *locals* and *outsiders*. To look at some of the historical photos available is to realize how much Transylvania County has changed in the past forty years or so. It has so much more to offer the visitor. When we look deeper into this development, however, we need to recognize that this change, with all of its attractiveness for outsiders looking for a better life or a better tourist destination, has led in many instances to a great deal of loss on the part of those whose family roots in this place reach deep into the past. As an outsider, I must try to be sensitive to this sense of loss; I must exert my imagination in order to empathize with those for whom the very reasons that brought me here have led perhaps to a feeling of dispossession.

Yes, empathy is not easy. It is rather quite a tall order! However, in a world which seems to be getting smaller and smaller, where the epiphany of the other, of an ever more *exotic* other, is becoming a more frequent experience than ever before, we must cultivate empathy as perhaps our only real possibility of survival as a species. And this need for empathy goes beyond our fellow human beings. It must encompass the entirety of the planet!

How, then, are we to proceed? There are no recipes, no twelve easy steps. There is no science of empathy that could stipulate clear rules to follow. Before this enormous challenge to see with the eyes of another, listen with the ears of another, and feel with the heart of another, we must practice a great deal of humbleness. We must realize that we are often at a loss to put ourselves within the frame of reference of the other. Sometimes we are too quick to speak, to counsel, to give an opinion, when the only truthful thing we can offer is a discreet, silent, respectful presence before the mystery of the other!

What is more, we must strive to build a ***community of empathy***. We must realize that the challenges and urgency of empathy cannot be met alone. We must practice to stand in humbleness before the

other –whether their otherness is based on the color of their skin, their gender, their ethnic origin, their religion or whatever— recognizing that we may never really know what it means to walk in their shoes.

But there is yet another hazard in the practice of empathy: its slippage into condescension, quite a stealthy operation of the ego. We must be careful to realize that true empathy does not look down on the other, does not patronize him or her. Empathy is about recognizing in the other a bottomless reserve of dignity that calls first of all for respect and for putting judgment on hold. Yes, it is about seeing with the eyes of the other and feeling with their hearts, but it is also about allowing yourself to be approachable, even vulnerable. Empathy is about shared humanity.

Indulge me to close these words with a final anecdote, this one concerning my son, who is a fourth grade teacher in New York City. A young Taiwanese girl joined his classroom in the middle of the semester. She knew absolutely no English, and sat silent in class, surely feeling isolated and intimidated by everyone and everything around her.

Have you ever been in a room where everyone else speaks a foreign language that you don't understand? It comes through as a string of meaningless noises that you would be totally incapable of domesticating with spaces between discrete words, with periods, commas or semicolons. So, the same language that gathers everyone else in the room together into a community of understanding stresses your alienation and solitude.

My son, who had ventured earlier in his life into some Mandarin lessons, approached the girl and whispered “Wǒ zhīdào le,” which in Mandarin Chinese means “I understand now.” Two tears rolled down her cheeks. And thus began her integration into a new community of empathy and understanding.