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The Power of Empathy

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I recently read an article by Dr. Patricia Fitzgerald titled "[The Groundbreaking Study Proving Dogs Can Help Us to Be More Fully Human](#)." The study was based upon the results of mentoring at-risk teens serving time in juvenile correctional facilities in providing obedience training to sheltered dogs in order to increase the likelihood that they would be adopted. Dr. Fitzgerald explained that such teens don't tend to possess the emotional skills needed to live within a civilized society. Children typically learn such skills through healthy attachments in childhood and they can impact how children see themselves, discern the world, and interact with others. The study found that those who completed the program demonstrated "increased emotional intelligence, decreased self-serving/anti-social behavior, and increased empathy. [Since] empathy is what makes us human, dogs are teaching us to be human."

Despite the fact that it has long-been known that empathy is a learned skill, the results of this study are incredibly meaningful and important. This is especially true, considering the information contained within Harvard University's Making Caring Common Project's report titled "[The Children We Mean to Raise: The Real Messages Adults Are Sending About Values](#)" that was published in 2014. The report stated in pertinent part as follows:

Selfishness and indifference to others among both children and adults are commonplace. Too often, students who are different are mocked or bullied, too many children are disrespectful to both other children and adults, and too few children and adults feel responsibility for their communities ... Our findings suggest that youth's fundamental values are awry ... Youth appear to value caring for others less as they age ... When children don't prioritize caring, they're also less motivated to develop the social and emotional skills, such as empathy, needed to treat people well day to day ... [Instead,] they are at greater risk of many forms of harmful behavior, including being cruel, disrespectful, and dishonest. These forms of harm are far too commonplace...

Any healthy society depends not only on developing in youth the urge and ability to care for others but also on instilling in them other ethical values. Perhaps especially, a civil and just society depends on developing in youth a strong commitment to fairness ... Our research suggests that we are not preparing children to create this kind of society ...

In other words, at-risk teens are by no means alone with regard to their lack of emotional skills needed to live within a civilized society.

At the root of this problem may be a rhetoric/reality gap, a gap between what parents and other adults say are their top priorities and the real messages they convey in their behavior day to day ... Can we as adults 'walk our talk' about child-raising? After all, almost all of us believe that raising caring, ethical children is crucial. It's also no small matter that adults' basic credibility is at stake if young people, with razor sharp alertness to hypocrisy view us as saying one thing while consistently prioritizing something else. Moreover, the costs of inaction are high, given not only the risks to both our children's social, emotional, and ethical capacities and happiness but other threats, including increasing political factionalism and incivility at a time when we face huge problems that need to be addressed collectively ...

The solution is straightforward, but not easy. To begin, we'll have to stop passing the buck. While Americans worry a great deal about children's moral state, no one seems to think that they're part of the problem. As adults, we all need to take a hard look at the messages we send to children and youth daily.

Empathic skills are the key to solving this problem. Empathy involves understanding another person's situation from their perspective. As

such, you must be able to place yourself in someone else's shoes and feel what they are feeling and without judging them. According to Dr. Brene Brown, Ph.D., LMSW, "empathy moves us to a place of courage and compassion. Through it, we come to realize that our perspective is not the perspective."

Usage of the word "empathy" appears to have increased significantly in recent history. In fact, people tend to throw that term around quite a bit and insist that they are empathic themselves. Unfortunately, most people are not self-aware and thus tend to see themselves differently than how others see them. In actuality, empathy predominantly involves learning about someone else's worldview. Furthermore, that learning process is shaped to a very great degree by one's personal relationships. In fact, a University of Virginia study conducted in 2013:

... strongly suggests that we are hardwired to empathize because we closely associate people who are close to us -- friends, spouses, lovers -- with our very selves. 'With familiarity, other people become part of ourselves,' said James Coan, a U.Va. psychology professor in the College of Arts & Sciences. 'Our self comes to include the people we feel close to,' Coan said. In other words, our self-identity is largely based on whom we know and empathize with.

The amazing and true story of Claiborne Paul Ellis is about the tremendous power of empathy that develops through our relationships with "people who are close to us." Mr. Ellis was a leader in the Ku Klux Klan who renounced his Klan membership in 1971 to become a civil rights activist. This unlikely transformation occurred because of a friendship that developed between he and Ann Atwater, an African-American grass-roots civil rights activist, while they served together on a steering committee to deal with court-ordered desegregation in Durham, North Carolina. Mr. Ellis died in 2005 and Ms. Atwater spoke at his funeral.

This is consistent with what we have seen play out in national politics with regard to issues pertaining to the LGBT community. For example, it took having a gay son for conservative Ohio Senator Rob Portman to reverse his hardline position against gay marriage. When announcing his change of opinion, Sen. Portman said the following:

I've come to the conclusion that for me, personally, I think this is something that we should allow people to do, to get married, and to have the joy and stability of marriage that I've had for over 26 years. That I want all of my children to have, including our son, who is gay. My son came to Jane, my wife, and I, told us that he was gay, and that it was not a choice, and that it's just part of who he is, and that's who he'd been that way for as long as he could remember.

The impact of empathy in judicial decisions was addressed in an article by Adam N. Glynn of Harvard University and Maya Sen of University of Rochester published in 2014 and titled "Identifying Judicial Empathy: Does Having Daughters Cause Judges to Rule for Women's Issues?" In that article, the authors stated the following: "Judges with daughters consistently vote in a more feminist fashion on gender issues than judges who have only sons. More broadly, this result demonstrates that personal experiences influence how judges make decisions." The authors mentioned that this was consistent with most public opinion scholarship literature, which reflects that individuals who have daughters tend to be more liberal with regard to political and social issues.

When Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, announced that he was gay, he said, "Being gay has given me a deeper understanding of what it means to be in the minority and provided a window into the challenges that people in other minority groups deal with every day. It's made me more empathetic, which has led to a richer life." What Mr. Cook expressed was in complete accord with the findings of the University of Virginia study. If a person happens to be a member of a minority group that is discriminated against, how much more familiar can a person be than with themselves?

The first sentence in Martin Golder's article titled "The Journey to Empathy" is "In conflict resolution empathy is a central tool and way of being."

I will be the first to admit that when Senator Rob Portman reversed his stance on same-sex marriage because of his own son's sexual orientation, I viewed him as nothing but a self-serving hypocrite. In the past, I have had that very same reaction each time a politician has reversed their stance on an issue only after understanding the harm it will cause someone dear to them. I now realize that those politicians were not self-serving hypocrites at all; rather, they developed empathy through learning about someone else's worldview. This actually explains why the more liberal states are those with a more diverse and integrated populace. The more insular the group, the more limited its worldview.

Having a limited worldview affects outcomes and tends to damage those who fall outside of that perspective. This has very broad implications. For example, Scott Page, a professor at the University of Michigan who studies diversity in complex systems, says:

What we think of as 'science problems' affect everyone -- children, women, and men. What science decides to solve and for whom things are designed have a lot to do with who's doing the scientific inquiry ... Amid growing signs that gender bias has affected research outcomes and damaged women's health, there's a new push to make science more relevant to them ... Analysts say that more women are needed in research to increase the range of inventions and breakthroughs that come from looking at problems differently than men typically do ... Involving more qualified women, as well as additional 'social identities' -- gay people, African Americans and Latinos, those with physical disabilities, and others -- can enrich the creativity and insight of research projects and increase the chances for true innovation.

If a mediator, a judge, a politician, a scientist, or anyone else for that matter, has a limited worldview as a result of their personal background and life experiences, how does that impact their assumptions and ultimately the decisions they make both personally and professionally? Unless a person has become more empathic by being a member of a minority group that is discriminated against, what personal relationships shaped their learning process? In a diverse society, how do limited or otherwise sheltered worldviews affect the level of civility and commitment to fairness?

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