

Do We have an Empathy Deficit?
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One of the key attributes of the truly civilized is empathy: being able to comprehend the feelings of others around us. Most babies have this attribute, showing great distress when in a room with a baby who is crying. Some animals have this as well, most apparent in good dogs who are very gentle with a human baby or who befriend an animal of another species. I recall seeing a clip on television about a young dog who befriended a fawn, the two playing together with great delight.

I suspect that empathy has a survival value, enabling us to live together in communities peaceably. This value is promoted in classical folklore---much of it in Christian Europe---with stories that reward the kind child who brings water to an old woman or beggar whom her siblings have scorned. The old woman has magical powers that help the kind child ultimately to prevail.

One of the oldest Greek myths is about an elderly married couple, survivors of the great flood, who are visited by some ragged strangers. The couple offer their hospitality and the strangers turn out to be gods, who then permit the couple to re-people the world by throwing stones over their shoulders.

Every major religion promotes charity, taking care of the poor and weak. In our own civilization, we often hear \223there but for the grace of God go I,\224 an acknowledgment that we ourselves could be poor, starving, or even criminal, were we not blessed by God's good will. This, of course, is empathy.

Why then is the world seemingly facing an extraordinarily awful epidemic of lack of empathy, lack of compassion? How does one unlearn what should be both innate in us and taught as civilizational values?

o When rapists in India continue to rape (and sometimes murder) a woman who just happens to be in their environment, why can't they imagine what that would feel like if it were they being so violated? Where is their empathy?

o The trafficking of women for sexual slavery around the world---how can men from the United States or Europe become sex tourists? How can they avoid empathy when using fellow human beings, often children, for their own warped pleasure?

o Where is the empathy or even natural maternal feeling of a Cambodian woman who actually sold her three-year-old daughter to a bordello, where she was then raped and traumatized? On Nicholas Kristov's Holding Up Half the Sky, we see that battered child in a safe house, and wonder how could a man have so little empathy that he could rape a toddler? We see a little girl, dying from AIDS who whispers: \223how could a man value a few minutes of his pleasure over my misery and death?\224

o How can my own community so misplace empathy that they provide clean needles for our hordes of homeless young druggies rather than do the heavy lifting of helping them to recover from their habit? If you were trapped in a drug habit, wouldn't you want more than a clean needle?

o How can our political representatives avoid empathy when they enjoy an excellent medical plan but do not want it for those less lucky than they? How much meanness replaces human empathy today?

o Where is the empathy of young terrorists who do not care a jot about the women and children they are about to blow up for a stupid cause? Is their empathy so dead that they would not even care if their own mother or siblings were in that bank, market, or marathon?

o Where is the empathy of our great religious institutions (male power) who cannot imagine what it is like to be a woman forced to have multiple pregnancies? If husbands were battered, would they understand wife beating better? Can they pretend to care about poverty if they do not care about the poor women trapped in their religion's prohibitions?

We need to nurture that empathy once again before we lose what civilization we have.

There but for the grace of God go I.

677 words

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