

A photograph of a rugged mountain peak covered in snow, set against a soft, pinkish-orange sky at dawn or dusk.

“Resolve to be tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the wrong. Sometime in life you will have been all of these.”

- George Washington Carver

The Power of Genuine Empathy

This post will get a bit personal. Something I don't find easy to do, nor particularly like to do except with people where some level of connection exists or is being developed. On the other hand, giving value sometimes demands that we step out of our comfort zone or our normal mode of engaging with the world, and I believe this topic is worth it, both as a reflection of commitment to this blog, and as part of an ongoing learning process for me.

Somewhere in your travels through life, even if you are just starting the journey, you would have heard something about the importance of empathy.

There are various flavours of this discussion. At one end of the spectrum, the idea that you can and should “reflect back” what people say or feel, as a way of demonstrating empathy and establishing a connection, even subconsciously. At the other end of the spectrum from my perspective is genuine empathy that has no ulterior or underlying motive to it.

The distinction may be subtle and the point may be nuanced, but it is an important one.

While it can be useful as a starting point and as part of a learning process to take the first approach, the ultimate is to feel and to convey genuine empathy for its own sake. Here's the personal dimension of this post and of this One Big Idea:

I was not a very empathetic kid. There are reasons for this as I reflect back, but in the end, the statement is true. There are works of research and writing that draw a positive correlation between degrees of introversion and levels of empathy (see the book "Quiet" by Susan Cain); let's just say for now, this was not, initially, a strong personal characteristic.

My Dad taught me the importance of genuine empathy. My Mom showed me what it means to live that degree of connection to and empathy for people, and those lessons of early childhood and youth have been transformative.

Today, this is a matter of great importance in the way I engage with the world. Still a lot of work to do, but much more at the centre of the approach in a wide variety of contexts.

What Does it Mean?

Let's keep it simple: genuine empathy is about making a sincere and unconditional effort – that is, an effort that expects nothing in return – to see things from the perspective of another. This can be at various levels, including intellectual and emotional among others. It need not be the achievement of 'connection' or empathy: even a genuine attempt can have very positive effects.

This post does not contemplate empathy as a tool – a tool to achieve outcomes, to serve self-interest or to take advantage of vulnerabilities of others by seeming to provide a safe, non-judgmental relationships or point of connection.

While there are views that argue it is impossible to detach from one's own "lens" on the world, to step out of one's history, experiences, biases – the totality of what makes up a point of view, to really see things from the perspective of another. Perhaps.

Empathy, even the most genuine kind, is not an absolute. It can involve degrees and can progress over the course of a moment, a situation, a lifetime. It can be effective and have its positive outcomes even if it is incomplete in its reach – the key is genuine intent.

This is One Big Idea that, taken to heart, can truly light a thousand candles and many thousands more when it is further conveyed into the world.

For those of you reading who perceive a show of empathy to be an act of weakness, I'll just make the statement that it is not, and invite you to experience this truth for yourself. There is strength in the act of allowing empathy to enter into an interaction, a situation or a lifelong relationship. More, there is the potential to have a profound positive impact in so doing.

Let's get Practical...

Right, so this is one of those “emotional IQ” type discussions. Is it pointless fluff? What possible practical impact could it have to genuinely try to be empathetic, or, if successful, to BE empathetic and have that come across clearly? A few ideas, which will hopefully inspire you to light a few candles:

- Negotiation can be combative and win/lose, or (when appropriate!), one can positively and constructively take the other party's viewpoint, genuinely strive for an outcome that serves both. Empathy is an important element of such an approach
- The power of empathy across cultures and across generations cannot be overstated: extend empathy to a new arrival in your home country as they work to settle in – a neighbour, a business person, service provider...extend empathy to a younger or an older person in your interactions
- If you are part of a large organization, empathize with those who “have been there forever” and have certain ways of doing things, or with those who have the fire of early career and the desire to “make their mark” by innovating, challenging the status quo and otherwise asking a lot of questions. The overall outcome will be much better for all and for the organization

- Strive to genuinely empathize with classmates, associates, acquaintances whose views are significantly different from yours – attempt to see the other perspective, perhaps even to learn from it

By the Way...

Empathy that is contrived and appears to be offered with an ulterior motive in mind may work once or twice, but it will ultimately be subject to the light of truth and will damage credibility and trust. A demonstration of empathy is just that: it does not (necessarily) commit you to further action, but opens the door to further connection if desired.

“I empathize with your position on this matter, however...”

There is nothing that comes to mind as I type this sitting on an aircraft waiting to take off, that can be shared as a “lesson learnt” or a warning about the risk or the downside of extending genuine empathy into the world.

If you have such an experience and would like to share it, please do.

In the meantime, consider the impact you can have by simply seeing something from another’s point of view. By the simple act of doing so, you will light a candle with this One Big Idea.

