

Empathy
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There are many ways to define and understand empathy. Commonly, empathy means to share an understanding of the experience and emotions of another. Empathy can be a great gift, and in some moments, utterly debilitating. Back in December, I chose empathy as the topic for the first Sunday after the inauguration, because I had a feeling that this word would be in the wind a lot this week as Joe Biden and Trump are compared and contrasted in the news. President Biden has lived through a number of very hard losses, and drew on his experience in his Inaugural address:

Because here is the thing about life: There is no accounting for what fate will deal you.
There are some days when we need a hand.
There are other days when we're called on to lend one.
That is how we must be with one another.¹

Biden's personal experience is often cited as a well from which he shares empathy with others. And that may be true, but the experience of tragedy does not necessarily lead to empathy and in some cases might lead to a person to closing off from connection with others. Call up in your mind the most empathetic and compassionate people in your life. Sometimes that way of being derives from challenges overcome, but empathy, and compassion, are spiritual practices and tools for all of us. Think of those classic body-switch movies, like *Freaky Friday*. In those stories, part of what folks need to learn is empathy, right? The main character is usually someone who thinks they know everything about another person's life, until they stand literally in their shoes. Empathy is an opportunity to practice decentering one's self in their own story, to acknowledge the experience of others.

Compassion is a feeling of sympathy for another, *coupled with a desire to alleviate another's suffering*. Compassion and empathy are neighbors. Compassion is vital to spiritual life as it helps one live into the reality of our radical interconnection with all that is, connecting one to the flow of life and creation, and in this way, to connect with the infinite. When we are in need of compassion, and when we are able to offer compassion and empathy, we give of ourselves and our experience, and importantly, we hold out to another being, a little piece of the ineffable, a thread to connection that helps someone know they are not alone, and that wherever they are experiencing is not all that will be, forever.

There is no hierarchy of suffering or worthiness of empathy and compassion. In Brené Brown's words:

Empathy is not finite, and compassion is not a pizza with eight slices. When you practice empathy and compassion with someone, there is not less of these qualities to go around. There's more. Love is the last thing we need to ration in this world. The refugee in Syria doesn't benefit more if you conserve your kindness only for her and withhold it from your neighbor who's going through a divorce.²

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<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/>

² Brené Brown in *Rising Strong*

Compassion and empathy are endless reservoirs, that are refilled by each of us, as we use them. Compassion grows compassion. Rumi reminds us in his description of consciousness:

The Source is full, its waters are ever-flowing;

Do not grieve, drink your fill!

Don't think it will ever run dry --

This is the endless Ocean!

Pass again from the heavenly realm and plunge into the ocean of Consciousness.

Let the drop of water that is you become a hundred mighty seas.

But do not think that the drop alone becomes the Ocean—

the Ocean, too, becomes the drop!

And yet. A person can go through their whole life being self-centered in such a way that they extrapolate their experience to infinity. If *they* don't like peanut butter, no one does, or should, and those who say they do are wrong. A person could close down to all other's experience and stay cut off from that ocean of compassion. Which is why empathy and compassion must be a practice. Not only to love and be in relationship when it is easy and feels great and affirming, but to challenge ourselves to see the humanity and value in people who live very different lives, and share different values than us. To serve our principle of "justice, equity and compassion in human relations." In Amanda Gorman's words:

And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us,
but what stands before us.

We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,
we must first put our differences aside.

We lay down our arms
so we can reach out our arms
to one another.

The practices of empathy and compassion are throughout Hebrew and Christian scriptures, from the prophets to the gospels. In the Gospel of Mark 10:25 - 28, there is a parable: [A] lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 26He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' 27He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' 28And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' (NRSV)

The Talmud, a collection of commentaries on the Torah written by rabbis from 1500-1800 years ago, includes stories of the Rabbi Hillel. One famous story is from the book *Shabbat*:

Once there was a gentile who came before [Rabbi] Shammai, and said to him: "Convert me on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.

Shammai pushed him aside with the measuring stick he was holding. The same fellow came before Hillel, and Hillel converted him, saying: "That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow person, this is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary, go and learn it."

How does one learn and practice empathy? Check assumptions about the experiences, values and expectations of the folks with whom one is interacting. Practice decentering one's own experience. Listen. Listen. Listen. Practice widening and narrowing the emotional connections

between one's self and the world. The spiritual goal of empathy is not people as raw nerves feeling everyone's feelings, but, to live and act with perspective and compassion, with heart and mind open to experiences that are not one's own. Again from Amanda Gorman:

If we're to live up to our own time
Then victory won't lie in the blade
But in all the bridges we've made
That is the promise to glade
The hill we climb
If only we dare
It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit,
it's the past we step into
and how we repair it³

If the act of compassion, of empathy in action, includes the desire to alleviate another's suffering, than it must also include a call to justice. Sometimes we need a hand, sometimes we lend a hand, *and sometimes* we work to dismantle the systems of oppression at the root of so much suffering in this world. Whatever that call to justice might be, the practice of empathy, of listening, listening, will be the foundation and vital to whatever comes next. As we listen, as we connect our experience with others, we refresh the well of compassion, we hold out to another being, a little piece of the ineffable, a thread of connection that helps someone know they are not alone. We learn for what and whom we will stand up.

The hill we climb
If only we dare

So may it be. Amen.

³ Amanda Gorman, "The Hill We Climb"