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ARTICLE

"But What If I Can't Imagine That?": Rethinking and Redefining Empathy

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Abstract

As an African American deeply impacted by the personal and communal trauma from the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and alleged "racial reckoning" that took place globally immediately thereafter, I have personally wrestled with the responses of many non-Black persons to these events. Though the responses came from well-intentioned friends and colleagues trying to be helpful and conciliatory, they resonated as an empty refrain: "I don't know what it means to be Black, but...." Each time I heard this refrain, I found myself pondering more deeply what and how these folks, and all folks, understand and practice empathy. My experiences and research revealed a similar concern that I witness across many situations in which people think they are being helpful when in fact they are not doing what real empathy requires – being *with* the person rather than trying to imagine what the person is going through. This article challenges the faulty ways that people have been taught to think about and practice empathy in hopes of offering a model that might facilitate in more meaningful ways ties that bind human hearts and minds.

Keywords: emotion; empathy; empathy gap; humanity; imagination; Project Humanities

> *Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?*
>
> —Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)[1]

I.

As a global society, humans are getting empathy wrong. Both lessons taught and lessons learned have left us with what some identify as an "empathy gap" – social divisions, human disconnections, and missed communications. Psychologists Judith Hall and Mark Leary, in "The U.S. Has an Empathy Deficit: Here's What We Can Do about It," contend:

> You don't have to be a social psychologist ... to see that Americans are experiencing an empathy deficit. People everywhere lack the sense that others care, which makes the

[1] Thoreau 1854 (https://tinyurl.com/bdf).

> medical, economic, political and societal assaults on our fundamental trust in the world even harder to handle.
>
> Fixing this empathy deficit is a challenge because it is not just a matter of having good political or corporate leaders or people treating each other with good will and respect. It is, rather, because empathy is a fundamentally squishy term. Like many broad and complicated concepts, empathy can mean many things. Even the researchers who study it do not always say what they mean, or measure empathy in the same way in their studies – and they definitely do not agree on a definition. In fact, there are stark contradictions: what one researcher calls empathy is not empathy to another.[2]

The creation and existence of the Center for Building a Culture of Empathy (Santa Barbara, CA), with its mission to create a "global empathy movement," is premised on this lack of empathy that manifests in arguably some of the worse human behaviors and circumstances that define the conditions of being human: "People are not understanding each other across the gulf of race, class, religion, etc.; violence; conflicts, war, genocide; hunger, disease, poverty; refugees; climate change, environmental degradation; overwhelm, alienation, depression, fear, hopelessness; People are not caring about each other" ("The Problem," Center for Building a Culture of Empathy website).[3] This Center offers several quotations by former U.S. President Barack Obama to underscore this empathy deficit, which he, too, defines problematically as "the inability of people to stand in other folks' shoes," and insisting that "We are in great need of people being able to stand in somebody else's shoes and see the world through their eyes" (Center website).[4] While there may be no single agreed-upon definition of empathy, perhaps what is easier to identify is pointing out what is not empathy. To watch someone drowning with no concern or effort to assist or support the person can signal a lack of empathy, whether or not the observer knows how to swim or how to save a drowning person. Of course, this presumes that we are observant enough to know that the person is not just playing in the water and fake drowning. Just a month after George Floyd's murder in May 2020, I used this same systemic-U.S.-racism-and-drowning metaphor in a telephone interview with *Arizona Republic* reporter Karina Bland for her piece, "What Should We [White People] Do to Fight Racism? We Are Asking the Wrong People."[5] Here is Bland's story as it recounts our conversation and her more empathy-specific takeaway:[6]

> I had called Neal Lester for help on a story. Lester is an English professor at Arizona State University and founding director of ASU's Project Humanities. He has done extensive research on race and society. And he's black.
>
> When I reached him, he said he did not have the emotional or psychological energy to talk about what is happening in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. I was the third person who had called him that morning.

[2] Hall and Leary 2020.
[3] Center for Building a Culture of Empathy 2024b.
[4] Center for Building a Culture of Empathy 2024a.
[5] Bland 2020.
[6] Bland 2020.

> "I'm not welcoming these calls," he said. "I have no wisdom. I have pain, hurt and anger."
>
> Lester sounded tired, and he is. Tired of talking about race, of saying the same thing every time this happens. He's tired of answering the questions.
>
> No, he's *not* OK. How could he be? Not during a pandemic that already is disproportionately killing black and brown people. Not while experiencing the trauma of the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd without a chance to regroup in between.
>
> It's not a single incident but decades of having his humanity denied.
>
> He's grappling with the horror of that, and people like me ask him again and again, "What should we do?"
>
> "I don't know what to do because I didn't start this," Lester said. But he lives it.
>
> I'm asking the wrong questions of the wrong people.
>
> I should be asking questions of other white people, the ones decrying looting but not the loss of human life, those insisting "all lives matter." I should ask, "How are you OK? If you are paying attention, how are you not outraged?"
>
> I shouldn't have to ask what to do, Lester said. If someone were drowning, would I wait for someone to tell me what to do?
>
> "People are drowning," Lester said.
>
> If people ask what to do, I should ask, "What did you do the last time it happened?" If the answer is "nothing," that's telling.

Leading with empathy would mean that an observer would do something, not just watch and wait, as did three police officers when an unsheltered person dove into the Tempe Town Lake and they watched a human drown, allegedly because they did not have training on water rescues.[7] One need not imagine oneself drowning to be propelled into action if empathy leads actions and interactions.

Indeed, President Obama and Hall and Leary, above, miss the mark about empathy by reverting to this unhelpful refrain in their final advice regarding closing the "empathy gap": "Take the time to ask those you encounter how they are feeling, and really listen.[8] *Try to put yourself in their shoes*" (emphasis added). How does one imagine oneself drowning? This last part about being in another's shoes – assuming that the other person actually has shoes – is what Project Humanities at Arizona State University argues needs to be reconsidered and rethought. I, too, as a scholar, subscribed partially to this problematic notion of empathy in my 2015 *op ed* piece, "Seeing the World through Another's Eyes," wherein I mention more

[7] Hernandez 2022.
[8] Hall and Leary 2020.

than once the need to imagine another's reality.[9] These many years later, I see this as an impossibility. However, I still feel that we can, "If nothing else, … be empathetic enough to acknowledge the legitimacy of another's lived experience that is not and cannot be exactly our own."[10] Scott Monty is yet another industry leader who gets empathy wrong in this common distinction between sympathy and empathy:[11]

> Empathy is the ability to *experience* the feelings of another person. It goes beyond **sympathy**, which is caring and understanding for the suffering of others. Both words are used similarly and often interchangeably (incorrectly so)….
>
> Upstairs, my six-year-old daughter was running in the hallway when she tripped and hit her head. I immediately rushed to her side, showing her that I felt badly for her (sympathy). As I comforted her, I told her I knew how much it hurt, because I've hit my head before (empathy).
>
> The feeling of sympathy arises when we recognize another person's suffering, as opposed to empathy, where the other person's pain or suffering is *felt.* You express sympathy but you share empathy.

There is absolutely no way to match pains, no matter how imaginative we believe ourselves to be. This daughter's pain does not need to be matched but rather responded to. To center this parent's memory of hitting their head likely does little to center this child in this moment but, rather, shifts focus to the parent. This is where, how, and why empathy fails.

II.

When George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police in May 2020, well-meaning white friends and colleagues approached me as an African American male with this refrain: "I don't know what it's like to be Black, but…" more times than I can count. While I understand this is a reaction to something that is so horrific that they don't know how to respond, it does little to comfort or bridge an ever-existing experiential divide. Arguably, this response does quite the opposite, because the very phrase itself centers the person observing, not the person experiencing the upset, pain, suffering, or loss. In fact, my white editor friend, Elizabeth McNeil, offered this alternative perspective in responding to this U.S. race moment: "Why does one have to be Black to be totally anguished and outraged at Floyd's murder?" This is precisely the question I asked in my post-George Floyd murder *op ed* response, "'No, I Am Not OK.' Thanks for Asking," in working through my own complex spectrum of emotions:

> So, no, I am not OK. If you are paying attention to what's happening in this country, and when you know our American and world history regarding our inhumanity to each other based on race – and all other systemic-isms that oppress and dehumanize – how can anyone be OK?
>
> How can anyone be OK when people are pushed to the edge from decades of having their humanity denied? How can anyone in the United States with their humanity –

[9] Lester 2015.
[10] Lester 2015.
[11] Monty (2020).

> their empathy, respect, integrity and compassion – intact be OK with racial violence in what we call the U.S. since the colonial era?
>
> If you are OK, perhaps your commitment to fundamental humanity as it fundamentally connects to social justice is not as deep as you believe. We are not all in this together. All lives do not matter and never have.[12]

While my response above was called "virtual signaling" by at least one presumably non-Black column reader, I realize now that the piece was asking for empathy rather than the sympathy that too many progressive white readers and respondents registered. These folks rested in a sadness that moved them nowhere. The many responses from Black folks who also experienced deep frustration, pain, and anger appreciated my piece, shared it, and re-shared it. It has been the most-circulated piece of intentionally public-facing writing from all my years in academia. Both those inside and beyond the academy expressed their emotional and spiritual connection with the sentiments of the piece.

In reality, so many – no matter the circumstance – have witnessed or even offered this meaningless refrain when responding to another person's loss, especially in death: "I know how you feel, since I...." While this response is somewhat programmed as an uncritical social expectation and etiquette ritual, it falls short of acknowledging and centering the person who at that moment is experiencing the emotional upset. What is troubling in these responses is not the authenticity of the comments but, rather, the fact that this kind of uncritical response is not a demonstration of empathy.

Indeed, the typical "I know how you feel" sort of response signals how problematic teachings about empathy are and continue to be from childhood through adulthood. Too often, research and fictional literature tell us that empathy is "walking in someone else's shoes," "seeing the world through another's eyes," or "stepping into someone else's skin." In business, effective leadership based in empathy supposedly looks like this:

> [E]mpathy ... is understanding a situation from someone else's perspective without judgment....
>
> The first of the empathy in leadership examples is a simple test of the golden rule. As a leader, ask yourself, "How would I feel in their shoes at this moment?"[13]

In Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, attorney Atticus Finch, attempting to teach his young daughter Scout to have empathy for the racial underdogs in the segregated Deep South, offers this parental advice: "'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view – ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."[14] What the father is asking of his young daughter is an impossibility. She cannot possibly do this to understand anything about race relations that is not her own experience. It does not mean, however, that Scout – even as a child – cannot understand that treating a Black man unfairly and making false accusations about a sexual assault is wrong. She need not walk in anyone's skin except her own to recognize and understand

[12] Lester 2020.
[13] "Empathy in Leadership" 2023.
[14] Lee 1960, 32.

discrimination, lies, and crime. No one else's skin fits them like their own skin. Additionally, feet are like fingerprints, unique to their owner. So, no matter how much walking around in another's shoes – if in fact the individual has shoes, and not everyone does – that may occur, the fit for different folks will be different, and there's no way to know how another experiences a fit; thus, adults and children are being taught a (figurative) impossibility without question or clarity.

The reality is that these figures of speech and other imagination games are impossibilities. The very nature of imagining is that what is conjured up is not real, akin to the problematic simulation exercises that allegedly teach folks about systemic racism, as in university "Tunnel of Oppression" tours such as this one:

> Visitors to the Tunnel of Oppression at Southern Illinois University Carbondale ... will experience for themselves the discrimination and injustice that some people encounter on a daily basis.
>
> Participants will tour a series of connected rooms, each vividly portraying some form of oppression, prejudice, discrimination or exclusivity....
>
> The goals of the Tunnel of Oppression include:
>
> - Increasing awareness of oppression and discrimination and their impact on people.
> - Evoking an enlightened and educated discussion.
> - Bringing about positive changes.[15]

Not only is this exercise futile in creating empathy in participants, but it is here couched in the language of "touring," as though a foray into "trauma or poverty porn." Such is the case as well with the variations on mostly college students living in a cardboard box for a week on $2 to "understand" what it means to be unsheltered. For those participating in such exercises, this artificial activity is the very opposite of empathy and more experiential exploitation that severely limits awareness of the complexities of anyone's actual lived experience. Centering race specifically, Alisha Gaines, author of *Black for a Day: White Fantasies of Race and Empathy*, calls out these futile efforts – "empathetic racial impersonation" ("Alisha Gaines Investigates") – to get into another's skin to understand an experience.[16] Gaines's thinking on this matter emerged from this observation: "A peculiar desire seems to still haunt white people: 'I wish I knew what it was like to be Black.' This wish is different from wanting to cosplay the coolness of Blackness – mimicking style, aping music and parroting vernacular. This is a presumptive, racially imaginative desire, one that covets not just the rhythms of Black life, but for its blues,"[17] however temporarily. Gaines traces the literary and journalistic histories of white folks who take on what they see as the stero(typical) Black traits – skin, hair, mannerisms, eye coloring, and speech patterns – to pass as Black so as to unveil what Blackness is and what it is not allegedly more authentically than Black folks' lived experiences and testimonials could possibly communicate and document. About these white people's deeply reductive and fundamentally racist performances ranging from the 1940's Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ray Sprigle's memoir *In the Land of Jim Crow* (1949) to John Howard Griffin's

[15] Mathis 2020.
[16] "Alisha Gaines Investigates" 2017.
[17] Gaines 2024.

1960's *Black Like Me* (1961) memoir to Grace Halsell's 1969 memoir *Soul Sister* and most recently Canadian-American journalist Sam Forster's 2024 "firsthand account of modern life as a person of color"[18] account *Seven Shoulders: Taxonomizing Racism in Modern America*, Gaines concludes that such performances "end up reinforcing stereotypes and failing to address systemic racism, while conferring a false sense of racial authority.... To believe that the richness of Black identity can be understood through a temporary costume trivializes the lifelong trauma of racism. It turns the complexity of Black life into a stunt."[19]

Indeed, one person's experience cannot possibly match another's, since no two people can ever have the same exact experience. It is presumptuous of us all, then, to pretend that we can know how or what another person feels. Think of the times when we experience emotions so complicated that even we cannot articulate them. To imagine that anyone can know or understand how we feel or how another feels in any moment of intense emotion is even more problematic. What we can do, however, is learn the skills of observing another who is upset or discombobulated, then asking and responding in a way that centers that individual and not ourselves and our failed imaginaries.

Self-reflective reaction is how many – if not most of us humans – have been taught to practice empathy may well explain why we are not more emotionally connected or concerned about other folks: we cannot really *imagine* something that another person or living non-human is really feeling. In one example of imaginative play that fails children, Claire Lerner and Rebecca Parlakian, in "How to Help Your Child Develop Empathy," offer this game of pretend as an empathy-teaching strategy for toddlers: "**Use pretend play**.[20] Talk with older toddlers about feelings and empathy as you play. For example, you might have your child's stuffed hippo say he does not want to take turns with his friend, the stuffed pony. Then ask your child: How do you think pony feels? What should we tell this silly hippo?" Such games are problematic for several reasons, not the least of which is that the adult seems to be setting up a circumstance that has a "right" response, the response that this adult wishes to get. What happens if this child's response does not match the adult's expectation? How is any adult equipped imaginatively, emotionally, spiritually, or otherwise able to imagine how a stuffed animal feels? Whether on the playground or in the board room, these misguided lessons about empathy are the same. In the business world, effective leaders are asked to become "skilled at understanding a situation from another person's perspective" and "to imagine oneself in the situation of another, experiencing the emotions, ideas, or opinions of that person."[21] Such games of pretend for adults and children potentially lessen the ability to connect authentically with ordinary problems faced by other people. Certainly, with such complexities of human emotions, must "understanding" be a prerequisite to connecting with and responding to another's lived experience?

III.

Perhaps a more effective way to talk and think about and then practice and model empathy is to consider empathy as "being *with*" rather than "being *for*" another person. While Daron K. Roberts, in *A Kids Book about Empathy*, references the problematic "stand in someone else's

[18] Wise 2024.
[19] Gaines 2024.
[20] Lerner and Parlakian 2016.
[21] Center for Creative Leadership 2024.

shoes" trope in distinguishing empathy from sympathy, they do offer a more substantive and critically important distinction in this definition:

> **EMPATHY** … It's when you feel with someone who is experiencing something that's hard, sad, or scary. Empathy means you **listen**, **don't judge**, **feel with**, and **ask questions** …. **SYMPATHY** is when you feel "for" someone. Sympathy sounds like… "I feel sorry for you." "That sucks." "I can't believe that happened." **EMPATHY** is when you feel "with" someone. Empathy sounds like … "How did that make you feel?" "What can I do to help?" "Do you want to talk about it?"[22]

"Being with" means that there is no reason to have to *imagine* or even understand anything to make a human connection that soothes. There is absolutely no reason to engage in a futile effort to make another's experience somehow a distorted mirror of one's own experience. Empathy is being present with the person and not being coerced or expected to engage in a kind of hypothetical exercise of imagining.

My take on empathy is not to suggest that imagination can play absolutely no role in empathy practice but, rather, offers that conversations and deep thinking about empathy cannot start and stop with imagination. However problematic imagination is, it can certainly be one strategy of demonstrating empathy, but, again, this strategy centers the imaginer, not the lived experience of the person in duress. A week after George Floyd's murder, filmmaker Kasi Lemmons offered this provocative take on the inability of some white Americans to imagine Floyd's dying, the agony of the witnesses to his murder, or similar real effects of persistent systemic U.S. racism:

> Imagine being an unarmed man, three officers holding you down, one with a knee on your neck.
>
> Imagine that they relentlessly apply force while you plead for your life, while you call for your mother.
>
> Imagine them choking the life from you, checking your pulse to make sure you don't have one, then choking you three more minutes for good measure, then waiting three more minutes before calling an ambulance.
>
> Imagine being a 17-year-old bystander on the street, watching this unfold. Imagine you're a witness to murder.
>
> As a filmmaker, I help people imagine what it's like to be someone else, to experience things from a character's point of view – things they never will experience outside the theater. But when it comes to black life in America, there's only one conclusion I can reach about some white people: You don't care to put yourself in our shoes. The consequences of this lack of imagination for black Americans are deadly.[23]

Lemmons concludes that the harsh reality is that some people – in this case white folks – are not just incapable of imagining but have no interest in imagining what Black people's

[22] Roberts 2020, n.p.
[23] Lemmons 2020.

suffering is like.[24] Three months after Floyd's murder and the global Black Lives Matter protests, an NPR/KJZZ *Morning Edition* story, "As Nation Reckons with Race, Poll Finds White Americans Least Engaged," echoed Lemmons's conclusion of white apathy:

> As the nation navigates its most consequential racial justice movement in a half-century, some people have responded to the calls for action to remedy the country's racist past and present by protesting in the streets or doing something as simple as reading a book about race. But a new NPR/Ipsos poll finds that these people remain a minority.
>
> Though advocates believe true equality will not be achieved until all Americans are willing to grapple with racism, the survey showed that just 36% of those polled said they had taken concrete action to better understand racial issues after George Floyd's killing.
>
> White people were the least likely to have done so, at just 30%. That compares with 51% of Latinos, 49% of Asians, and 41% of Black people who answered "Yes" when asked: "Since the death of George Floyd in May, have you personally taken any actions to better understand racial issues in America?"
>
> ...
>
> The poll found that 58% of Americans acknowledge that racism is built into the American economy, government and education systems. That includes half of white Americans, though they were less likely than any other racial group to believe so.
>
> The poll was conducted from Aug. 20-21 and surveyed 1,186 adults in the continental United States, Alaska and Hawaii.[25]

Filmmaker Lemmons frames this reality of emotional disconnect or lack of empathy as a lack of moral curiosity that allows systems of oppressions more broadly to exist and persist:

> White people have never needed to exercise that kind of curiosity. You've never had to. You can live your whole lives without really considering how we live ours.
>
> ...
>
> Maybe that explains this lack of white imagination: The price of truly understanding black life in America is just too high. That understanding demands too much. If you felt this rage yourself, you would have to acknowledge what caused it, and what it makes you want to do.
>
> But while rage can lead to tragedy, it is also a terrible thing to waste. Rage can be useful, necessary even. It fuels our pride and lubricates our resilience. With discipline and unity, rage can change the world. So be enraged with us and for us. If you're unwilling to do that, know this: You can look away all you want. But we see you.[26]

[24] Lemmons 2020.
[25] Florido and Peñaloza 2020.
[26] Lemmons 2020.

Until humans develop and witness the skills of observation, of human connection, of a willingness to care about what another human is experiencing, imagination does absolutely nothing to demonstrate and manifest *human ties.* In the film version of the John Grisham's novel *A Time to Kill*, which recounts the rape of a young Black girl, the white defense attorney (played by Matthew McConaughey) uses an imagination strategy to get the mostly white jury – and largely white film audience – to care about the little girl and her father, who is on trial for killing the two white rapists:[27]

> Now I wanna tell you a story. I'm gonna ask y'all to close your eyes while I tell you this story. I want you to listen to me. I want you to listen to yourselves. Go ahead. Close your eyes, please.
>
> This is a story about a little girl walking home from the grocery store one sunny afternoon. I want you to picture this little girl.
>
> Suddenly a truck races up. Two men jump out and grab her. They drag her into a nearby field, tie her up, and they rip her clothes from her body. Now they climb on, first one then the other, raping her, shattering everything innocent and pure – vicious thrusts – in a fog of drunken breath and sweat. And when they're done, after they killed her tiny womb, murdered any chance for her to bear children, to have life beyond her own, they decide to use her for target practice. So, they start throwing full beer cans at her. They throw 'em so hard that it tears the flesh all the way to her bones – and they urinate on her.
>
> Now comes the hanging. They have a rope; they tie a noose. Imagine the noose pulling tight around her neck and a sudden blinding jerk. She's pulled into the air and her feet and legs go kicking and they don't find the ground. The hanging branch isn't strong enough. It snaps and she falls back to the earth. So, they pick her up, throw her in the back of the truck, and drive out to Foggy Creek Bridge and pitch her over the edge. And she drops some 30 feet down to the creek bottom below.
>
> Can you see her? Her raped, beaten, broken body, soaked in their urine, soaked in their semen, soaked in her blood – left to die.
>
> Can you see her? I want you to picture that little girl.
>
> Now imagine she's white.[28]

That McConaughey's character ends the scene by asking the jurors to "imagine she's white" suggests that only when we can imagine an experience as our own or close to our own does another's experience even matter to us. In another demonstration of consciously refusing to disrupt systemic racism against Black people, anti-racist educator Jane Elliot – author of the famous Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes social exercise with white Iowa third-graders to teach a lesson about the arbitrariness of U.S. racism and white privilege immediately after the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – offered to her 19 September 1995 Chapman University (Orange, CA) white lecture audience this Black/white race proposition:

[27] Grisham 1989.
[28] Schumacher 1996.

> I want every white person in this room who would be happy to be treated as this society in general treats our Black citizens. If you as a white person would be happy to receive the same treatment that our Black citizens do in this society, please stand. [No one stands]. You didn't understand the directions. If you white folks want to be treated the way Blacks are in this society, please stand. Nobody is standing here. That says very plainly that you know what's happening. You know you don't want it for you. I want to know why you are so willing to accept it or to allow it to happen to others.[29]

Elliott's exercise here is not about imagining but about acknowledging. That no one in the white audience stands speaks volumes about an unwillingness to abandon their white privilege in an effort to connect with another's circumstance in the cause of social justice. And when a failure of imagination occurs, where can we go to find understanding and to practice empathy? *Harvard Crimson* columnist David E. Lewis addresses the problem of empathizing in "Unlearning Empathy Politics" from their column "Unlearning Everything":

> Even the assumption that [empathizing] is always possible poses a problem. Some people's experiences are just so far removed from your own that it is simply impossible to imagine or understand them. How can a cis person walk in the shoes of a trans person? How can a white person understand what it means to navigate the world in a Black body? While they can start by consuming the writings and art of marginalized people based on their lived experiences, privileged people who attempt to empathize with others face incredible difficulty. After all, they have grown up with a racist, sexist, and classist media that has asked them to empathize primarily or exclusively with [cis heterosexual] white men while portraying marginalized peoples as laughing stocks, dangerous or subhuman. Thus, most attempts at empathizing amount only to selfish projection.[30]

Framed this way, to imagine the impossible is indeed impossible, and empathy does not require imagination of some future reality but rather a focus on the present, the here and now.

IV.

Under the umbrella of demystifying "humanities" as a discipline for those both inside and beyond the academy, Project Humanities at Arizona State University (Tempe, AZ) – the multiple award-winning university initiative that I founded and have directed for the past thirteen years – defines humanities in our tagline "talking, listening, connecting." *Talking*, *listening*, and *connecting* can take myriad forms and formats to invite the possibility that discovery of self and others can occur when individuals and communities engage in these three actions critical to empathy understanding and practice.

In particular, Project Humanities sees empathy within a rainbow of connected human responses to other human experiences. We call these connected principles Humanity 101®, which is not an academic course but rather a challenge to ourselves and each other to do better and to be better by living these values: compassion, empathy, forgiveness,

[29] Elliott 2020.
[30] Lewis 2021.

intergity, kindness, respect, and self-reflection. These principles are not faith-based but rather are based on a faith in humanity and the human possibility to be better and to do better. We see these principles as overlapping and as layers that flow seamlessly into the others while retaining their distinct hue across cultures, geographic boundaries, ages, and communities. To redefine empathy in such a way that it does not ask individuals to do what is impossible but, instead, empowers individuals to take an action that only they can do to comfort and support individuals – whether or not they can ever understand intellectually or emotionally another's experiences – is pretty radical. In addressing systemic injustices, this approach aligns with Lewis's sentiment in "Unlearning Empathy Politics," wherein they address head-on this notion that empathy alone will address systemic social injustices:

> Our society leaves billions of people across the globe without basic human needs such as shelter, health care, nutrition, and clean water because it was built by white supremacist, capitalist imperialists that devalue the lives of everyone except rich white men and prioritize profit above all else.
>
> ... I do not write against the concept of empathy itself, but rather its centering as a necessary, critical, or sufficient component to helping people or to making the world a better place.... [T]his centering of empathy is shallow, counterproductive, and deliberately milquetoast. In fact, it actively serves the interests of those who wish to uphold systems of oppression.
>
> The belief that feeling other people's emotions is a critical or necessary step in helping them is toxic because it implies that you need to experience someone else's pain to help them. Yet this is not necessary, as simply valuing other people's lives should be enough to convince you to listen and [act].[31]

Lewis further points out the often-ignored connection between empathy and ableism:

> Empathy advocates also seem to forget that not all people feel empathy, or at least not to the same extent. Empathy advocacy is often ableist because it implies that feeling other people's emotions is necessary. This idea contributes to the stigma that neurodivergent and sociopathic people are dangerous and immoral. It is also misguided because becoming enmeshed in other people's emotions can sometimes make it difficult to provide the support and care they need. Thus, empathy is not even always desirable.[32]

Indeed, perhaps the easiest, most authentic, and most accessible way to demonstrate empathy is to observe, ask, listen, and act, as in the following examples.

In Figure 1, the child with the blue backpack does not necessarily ask the child with the green lunchbox what they need but, rather, acts based on an observation. While the poster names this human connection as kindness, this is also a demonstration that language, words, and articulation are not always accessible for complex emotional realties in a moment. That the child with the blue backpack "took his hand and told him it would be ok" is certainly a response that demonstrates empathy. That the poster adds "Imagine the world if we all

[31] Lewis 2021.
[32] Lewis 2021.

Figure 1. The Teacher Next Door, "Such a kind soul!" *Facebook*, May 5, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=the%20teacher%20next%20door%20such%20a%20kind%20soul!.

looked out for each other like this little champion" reframes imagination as the possibility of human connection, not as a game de-centering the one experiencing the disruption. Figure 2 follows this same demonstration of empathy when an observant flight attendant, responding to a distressed passenger, "explained every sound and bump and even sat … holding her hand when it still got to be too much for her." These two individuals respond to a circumstance wherein their perceptive observations of others in distress do not lead with the fundamental impossibility and faulty emotional and spiritual prerequisite of "I know how you feel."

Such a demonstration of empathy is also clear in a letter posted on Facebook on May 12, 2024, Mother's Day, by the mother of a recently deceased young adult son (Figure 3). An understanding of empathy within the context of human ties registers in this sentence: "I don't know your pain, but I'm glad that I was able to experience a small part of the success that stemmed from the impact you nurtured your son to share with others." This publicly grieving mom responded thusly to the anonymous letter:

> So, this happened at 7:15am this morning. And even after clearly seeing the face on the security camera, I am still uncertain as to the name of this friend.
> Although I don't post and share each and every gesture, please know that I am extremely appreciative of the many ways young people (and elders in our village, too) continue to show up for me.

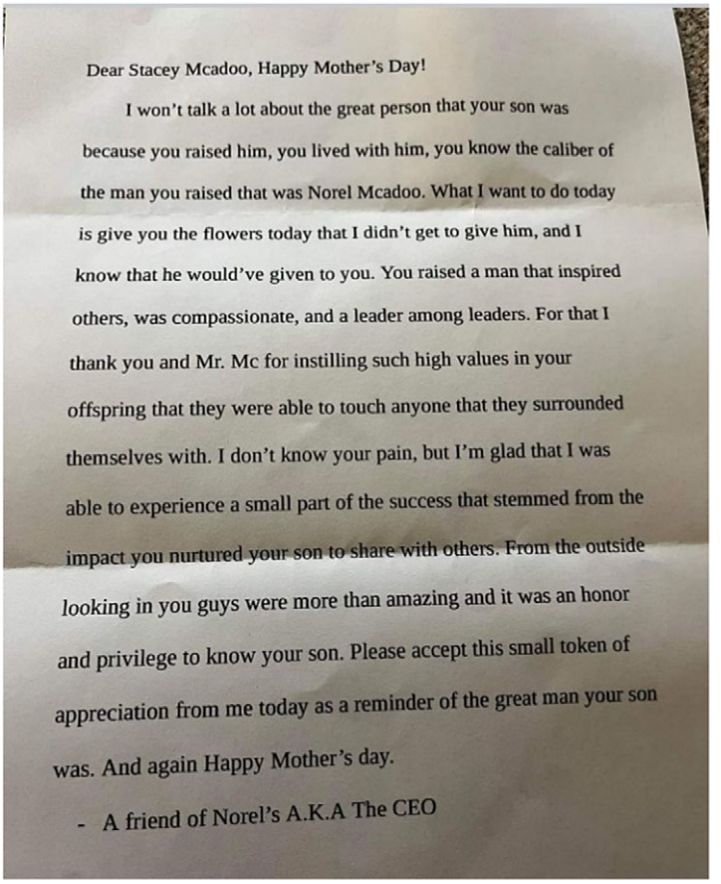
This is what empathy looks like, not asking or expecting others, or ourselves, to engage in futile imagination exercises that take us nowhere. This means that we humans have to unlearn past erroneous teachings and embrace the possibility that understanding or pretending to understand another's experience is not a path to authentic and meaningful

Figure 2. Zara Bella/Stranger Things in Stunning World, "Check out this gem of a flight attendant…," Facebook, May 4, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=Zara%20Bella%2C%20Stranger%20Things%20in%20Stunning%20World%2C%20check%20out%20this%20gem%20of%20a%20flight%20attendant.

human connection.[33] Equally important to a discussion of empathy is this sobering fact: Some folks don't really care what someone else is going through.

[33] Consider these empathy-building strategies for lifelong learners and practitioners. For instance, children's picture books are an excellent way to teach empathy as a skill that can be learned and practiced. Watching and connecting with other characters does not require that readers imagine anything or pretend to be anyone except themselves experiencing a text as a text unfolds. The following texts provide excellent ways to talk and think about empathy at all levels.

- Bates, Amy June, and Juniper Bates. 2018. *The Big Umbrella.* New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Bussolari, Cori. 2021. *Empathy Is Your Super Power: A Book about Understanding the Feelings of Others.* Emeryville, CA: Rockridge Press.
- Hoffman, Mary, and Caroline Binch. 1991. *Amazing Grace.* New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Khan, Hena. 2019. *Under My Hijab.* New York: Lee & Low Books.
- Kendi, Ibram X. 2022. *Goodnight Racism.* New York: Kokila, an imprint of Penguin Random House.
- Morrison, Toni, and Slade Morrison. 2002. *The Book of Mean People.* New York: Hyperion Books for Children.
- Roberts, Daron K. 2020. *A Kids Book about EMPATHY.* Portland, OR: A Kids Book About, Inc. 2023; New York: DK Children (Penguin Random House).


Dear Stacey Mcadoo, Happy Mother's Day!

I won't talk a lot about the great person that your son was because you raised him, you lived with him, you know the caliber of the man you raised that was Norel Mcadoo. What I want to do today is give you the flowers today that I didn't get to give him, and I know that he would've given to you. You raised a man that inspired others, was compassionate, and a leader among leaders. For that I thank you and Mr. Mc for instilling such high values in your offspring that they were able to touch anyone that they surrounded themselves with. I don't know your pain, but I'm glad that I was able to experience a small part of the success that stemmed from the impact you nurtured your son to share with others. From the outside looking in you guys were more than amazing and it was an honor and privilege to know your son. Please accept this small token of appreciation from me today as a reminder of the great man your son was. And again Happy Mother's day.

- A friend of Norel's A.K.A The CEO

Figure 3. Stacey James McAdoo, "Dear Stacey Mcadoo, Happy Mother's Day!…," *Facebook*, May 12, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10161733512203081&set=a.10150119571438081.

- Tonatiuh, Duncan. 2014. *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation.* New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers.
- Verde, Susan. 2018. *I Am Human: A Book of Empathy.* New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers.
- Williams, Alicia D. 2022. *The Talk.* New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Woodson, Jacqueline. 2001. *The Other Side.* New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Videos can also be effective ways to teach and talk about empathy with children. These videos show children's actions and behaviors and can promote conversation about what is witnessed and how others are responding to what they watch:

- The Doll Tests (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkpUyB2xgTM);
- Gender Equality Explained by Children (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLr2GNRnmXM);
- Systemic Racism Explained (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrHIQIO_bdQ);
- Discrimination Explained for Kids (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uXgJA-VfjI) (does engage imagination exercise).

Here are examples of how to get empathy wrong:

- Sesame Street on Empathy (https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=CS7Vh01zNOY&t=64s);
- What is EMPATHY? Explaining Empathy to Kids – Emotions (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27sho6s2eK8);
- Building Empathy for Kids (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVqZ4WgI9q8).

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