

Some of the deepest forms of kindness are based on understanding

Making an imaginative attempt to empathise with other people – in conversation, reading or travel – is essential to becoming more empathetic, and will also enrich your own life. **Roman Krznaric** discusses the revival of kindness



Roman Krznaric is a writer, social thinker and founding faculty member of The School Of Life in London. He is interested in creative thinking about social change and the art of living. He is currently working on a book about empathy, and blogs at outrospection.org.

'Kindness is undergoing its greatest revival since the Victorian era,' says Roman Krznaric. 'There are now plentiful books and websites where you can find long lists of ideas for carrying out "random acts of kindness", such as buying a hat for an old lady you see sitting alone in the park, paying for the car behind you at the motorway toll booth, or offering to walk your friend's dog.'

Despite the popularity of kindness, Krznaric himself is sceptical of its power. 'It can sometimes be a little too easy to describe actions as "kind",' he says. 'If a wealthy individual gives some money to charity, how valuable is their gift if it hasn't involved much of a personal sacrifice?'

If we truly want to make a difference to the world we live in, we need to look beyond kindness and become 'outrospective', says Krznaric. In 2009, he founded the

Outrospection movement (outrospection.org), dedicated to promoting the practice of empathy. 'I sense that we are at the beginning of a great outrospective wave,' he says. 'The pursuit of self-interest in the last century failed to bring personal fulfilment, so people in the West are looking for an alternative. Evolutionary biologists have shown that we are empathetic by nature. This scientific backing for the importance of empathy has helped boost outrospection as a potentially revolutionary movement of our time.'

Psychologies: Why is empathy so important?
Roman Krznaric: Empathising with someone creates a unique human bond that can spur us to take action on their behalf. 'Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality,' wrote novelist Ian McEwan. Some 250 years earlier, the political economist Adam Smith said something similar, which is that the primary source of 'our fellow feeling for the misery of others' is our imaginative capacity for 'changing places in fancy with the sufferer'.

Why is practising empathy so effective?
I once interviewed rich Guatemalan oligarchs

who were sometimes 'kind' to their indigenous coffee plantation workers – for instance, giving them days off for special Mayan festivals. But these same oligarchs also exploited their workers terribly, paying them less than the minimum wage and subjecting them to racist abuse. Kindness does not necessarily require having a sense of justice, which is one of its weaknesses. **So how can empathy strengthen our inclination to be kind?**

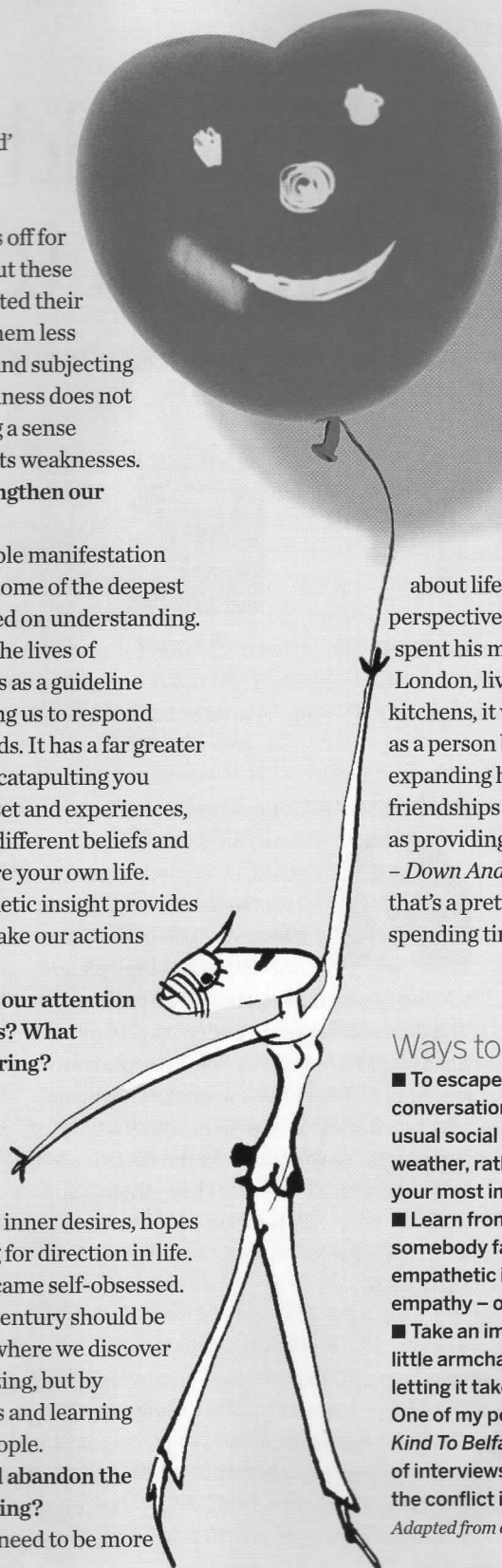
Empathy is just one possible manifestation of kindness, but I believe some of the deepest forms of kindness are based on understanding. Empathy sensitises us to the lives of others, and in doing so acts as a guideline for acts of kindness, helping us to respond appropriately to their needs. It has a far greater transformative potential, catapulting you into someone else's mindset and experiences, and giving you a vision of different beliefs and aspirations that can inspire your own life. We might say that empathetic insight provides the knowledge that can make our actions truly kind.

In what ways can turning our attention outwards change our lives? What kinds of benefits does it bring?

In the twentieth century – the age of introspection – we spent too much time gazing at our own navels, contemplating our inner desires, hopes and aspirations, searching for direction in life. The result was that we became self-obsessed. I believe the twenty-first century should be the age of outrospection, where we discover ourselves not by navel-gazing, but by stepping outside ourselves and learning about the lives of other people.

Does this mean we should abandon the quest for self-understanding?

Not at all – rather that we need to be more



balanced and recognise how much we can gain through empathetic engagement with other people.

The philosopher Socrates wrote that each of us should endeavour to 'know thyself'.

I think to know thyself you need to know other people.

The main benefit of turning our attention outwards is to learn about life through the experiences and perspectives of others. When George Orwell spent his months on the streets of Paris and London, living as a tramp and working in kitchens, it was an adventure that changed him as a person by challenging his prejudices, expanding his moral universe, giving him new friendships and nurturing his curiosity – as well as providing some good literary material – *Down And Out In Paris And London*. I think that's a pretty good result compared to spending time on the therapy couch. ■

Ways to get outside your own head

■ **To escape the confines of your own world view, have regular conversations with strangers, especially those outside your usual social circle.** This doesn't mean a brief chat about the weather, rather it involves a mutual exchange of thoughts on your most important beliefs and experiences.

■ **Learn from your experiences.** Ask yourself, when has somebody failed to empathise with me? Expanding your empathetic imagination requires recognising the impact empathy – or its absence – has had on your own life.

■ **Take an imaginative journey.** There's nothing wrong with a little armchair empathy – sitting down with a good book and letting it take you into the mental landscape of someone else. One of my personal favourites is *May The Lord In His Mercy Be Kind To Belfast* (HarperCollins) by Tony Parker. It's a collection of interviews with people, from bus drivers to terrorists, about the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Adapted from outrospection.org