

EMPATHY

and the Art of Living

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*Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look
through each other's eyes for an instant?*

Henry David Thoreau

Unwanted phone calls

It is a quarter to seven on a Tuesday evening. You are cooking dinner and, at the same time, trying to get your overtired five-year-old to put on his pyjamas. The phone rings. It could be your mother or your squash partner. But in all probability it is somebody trying to sell you something. You pick up the phone. 'Hello, is that Mrs_____?' Your name is mispronounced. You were right. Telesales. You interrupt their pitch, telling them you're not interested before you even know what they're calling about. They ask for just a few minutes of your time. You respond, impatiently, that you're busy cooking and that you're not interested. And just as they begin an apology, you hang up.

Being abrupt or rude to telesales people is quite normal. One of the gentlest, most thoughtful people I know usually responds with irritation, 'Could you please give me *your* phone number so I can phone *you* during *your* dinner?'

I rarely feel annoyed or impatient when my evenings are interrupted by a sales call from a stranger in Dublin or Dacca. But this is not because I am a saint. It is because I've worked in telesales myself and I know what it is like.

When I left university my first job was working in the kitchen of a barbeque chicken and sandwich shop in Sydney. After an exhausting twelve-hour shift with only fifteen minutes for lunch, I was sacked at the end of my first day for not putting the chickens on the skewers straight and peeling potatoes too slowly. My second job, and my third, fourth and fifth, were in telesales. I began selling a children's encyclopaedia, then moved on to laser printer toner, a taxation journal and, finally, photocopying machines.

I hated it. Every day, around an hour before work started, I began feeling sick in my stomach. In the office we were handed pages ripped from phone books and ordered to dial. The duty manager paced around, listening in to our conversations, gesturing to us to 'close' the sale, or shouting at us to get back

on the phone and reach our targets, otherwise we wouldn't be receiving any commission. And, of course, almost every person I called wanted to get off the phone immediately. I could hear the annoyance in their voices. Most nights we were subject to serious verbal abuse at some point. I didn't feel I could leave: I needed the money and telesales paid better than a factory job or working as a shop assistant.

This is an experience I have never forgotten. Now, when I pick up the phone and realise it is a sales call, I picture the caller sitting in a cubicle with my first duty manager glaring aggressively over their shoulder. I know that they are only doing it for the money, and that they would rather be visiting their sister and her new baby or studying for a Masters degree in engineering systems. But they feel they have no choice. They need the job.

So my approach is to be as polite and engaging as possible. I nearly always tell them that I know what their job is like because I've done it too and I wish them well with the rest of their calls. Sometimes I get into conversation with them about where they are calling from, their passions, what they would like to do with their lives. I ask their name and tell them mine. I almost never want to buy what they are selling, but I try to treat them as a human being and make a personal connection, to bridge our faceless divide.

The age of outrospection

Most books or courses on the art of living focus on how we can discover ways of improving our own lives. The emphasis is, unashamedly, on what can be done to help *me*. I find this kind of self-help approach too narrow, individualistic and narcissistic. In my experience, those people who have lived the most joyful and fulfilling lives have dedicated much of their time to thinking about and helping others. It has given them not only personal

satisfaction but also a sense of meaning. They have, in effect, lived a philosophy of ‘You are, therefore I am’.

Einstein recognised the need to move beyond self-help when he said: ‘Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: that man is here for the sake of other men.’ We will always feel something missing if we attempt to live alone, hermetically sealed in an isolation of our own making, thinking only of our own pleasures and pains. The mystery of existence is constituted by our relations with each other.

The twentieth century was an age of *introspection*, when psychoanalysis impelled us to search for who we are by looking inside our own heads. But the art of living involves escaping from the prison of our own feelings and desires, and embracing the lives of others. The twenty-first century should be the age of *outrospection*, where we discover ourselves by learning about other people, and finding out how they live, think and look at the world.

Empathy is at the heart of how to live and what to do, and is the ultimate art form for the age of outrospection.

Empathy: an emotional connection or an imaginative leap?

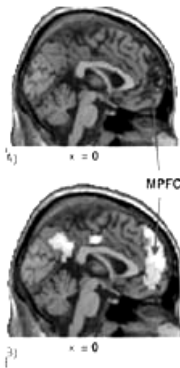
What exactly is empathy? The concept was invented over a century ago by German psychologists and now has two main meanings. The traditional approach is to think about empathy as an emotional connection between individuals. A different approach, and the one I consider essential for the art of living, is empathy as an imaginative leap in which you endeavour to understand the world from the perspective of another person.

If you open a psychology textbook you will usually encounter the first approach, in which empathy is defined as the

capacity to share or partake in the emotional life of others. That is, being able to feel what another person feels, such as when you feel anguish upon seeing the tearful anguish on the face of a child. Every time you wince when you see someone in pain, you are displaying empathy. This sharing of experience is different from sympathy, when your response does not mirror theirs, for instance feeling pity for someone who is feeling bereft after the death of a family member.

Empathy of this kind is usually considered an innate characteristic over which we have little control, a product of our natures that competes, often uncomfortably, with our selfish inner drives, aggressiveness and capacity for cruelty. In recent decades social psychologists and evolutionary biologists have highlighted this previously neglected aspect of our beings and social relations. They argue that it is just as natural for us to feel the pains and joys of others, and to suffer or enjoy with them, as it is for us to be preoccupied with our self interest. We all have this capacity to empathise although it may be more developed in some groups than others, such as in women more than men (a disputed finding), or amongst family members more than between strangers.

Neuroscientists have conducted experiments revealing how our empathic feelings for others are distinct from our feelings about ourselves. The figure below shows the variation seen when people think about themselves getting their finger pinched in a door compared to thinking about the same thing happening to another person: different neural mechanisms are at work.



Different parts of the brain ignite when we think about the self in pain (above) compared with when we think about another in pain (below).

Our ability to share in the emotional life of other individuals is probably the product of an evolutionary imperative: a mother who feels the pain of her child is more likely to care for them and ensure their survival; and members of a community who are sensitive to each other's needs and suffering may be in a stronger position to thrive, especially if they are mutually dependent upon one another in some way (e.g. for food or protection).

I am interested here, however, in a different form of empathy, but one which also involves extending ourselves beyond our own ego and self-interest. This is empathy as *the imaginative act of stepping into another person's shoes and being able to look at the world from their perspective*. To do this you need to develop an understanding of their hopes, fears, ambitions, beliefs, prejudices and other aspects of their worldview. The act of viewing the world from the vantage point of others is sometimes called 'perspective taking'.^{*} We do it all the time, and

^{*} The ideas of looking at the world through the eyes of others and perspective taking reflect the prevalence of visual metaphors in our language. I could also talk, for instance, about hearing the world through the ears of others, yet such alternative expressions are so

it is reflected in common phrases such as ‘I see what you mean’, ‘I really know where you’re coming from’, ‘What must he be feeling?’ or ‘Wouldn’t you hate to be her?’.

Unlike the first form of empathy, this second kind of perspective-taking empathy is more a product of nurture than nature, an element of our beings that we have a greater power to influence and develop. I consider it an art that can be cultivated. But how can it be done?

The art of empathetic imagining

The Christian tradition contains an apparently worthy ideal that you should ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’. The problem with this is that it makes your perspective, not theirs, the priority. George Bernard Shaw was aware of this when he quipped: ‘Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you. They may have different tastes.’ If I like chicken soup, it may not be the case that you do too.

If we are to take empathy seriously, we should instead place our effort in attempting to imagine the perspective, the desires, the hopes and beliefs of the other person. This is the essence of perhaps the most famous statement on the art of empathising, which was made by Mahatma Gandhi. I remember feeling a shiver run up my spine when I first read this quote, as if I had suddenly been given access to the truth about being human: ‘I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and

uncommon that they might confuse more than clarify what I wish to say.

spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.'

There is much beauty and wisdom in this quote. For a start it is a moral framework that each of us can follow: to consider the perspective of the most marginalised members of society in any decision that we make, and to ensure that they benefit from it in some way. It is also a guide to confront our own existential difficulties. When we feel paralysed by doubt or entangled in personal problems and obsessions to the extent that we do not know what to do next, we can find liberation through an act of empathetic imagining that suggests which path we should take. The talisman has the potential to provide clarity in our state of confusion or indecision.

The question that remains, however, is how do we know what the poorest and weakest person actually needs? And what do we know about the needs and thoughts of others with whom we may wish to empathise, such as a prisoner on death row in Texas, a Mayan peasant farmer from the Guatemalan Highlands, or even a friend who is in the midst of an emotional crisis?

We must discover ways of deepening our empathy if we are to succeed with Gandhi's talisman. The mere act of imagining is not enough, for we risk imposing our own desires on others, just as the Christian maxim would have us do.

It is possible to make a good attempt at deepening our empathy with others, even those who may be very different from us. There are three main ways of doing so:

- *Learning* - about their beliefs, lives and cultures from books, films, photos and other artworks and information sources
- *Conversation* - with them that is both profound and personal, and which gets beyond superficial talk
- *Experience* - of how they live so that you can understand what they have gone through for yourself.

The latter approach is what allows me to empathise with telesales workers. I've done it. I know most of them are not intent on annoying me; they are simply trying to make a living, often in difficult circumstances.

Three things often follow from these forms of empathetic imagining. First, you may come to recognise and appreciate the person as a unique human being rather than a faceless representative of some social group such as 'a peasant', 'a criminal', 'a rich banker' or 'a Chinese woman'. Second, you may find yourself compelled to take action on their behalf, especially if you come to understand that they are suffering in some way. Third, individual empathising may lead to large-scale social change if it happens on a mass scale. So empathising is about more than comprehending the worldview of another person; it also has the potential to encourage practical action and social transformation.

Beyond this, empathising will bring you unexpected insights and inspiration in your own life, and expand your curiosity, creativity and possibilities. Perhaps your personal problems will pale into insignificance when you find out what others are going through, or you will discover new ways to work or love that you had not previously considered.

Empathising will also serve the vital purpose of helping to challenge your prejudices and assumptions. When I hear people say, 'I am making an objective judgement' or 'I'm not racist, I treat everyone the same', I immediately become wary (except in the case of W.C. Fields: 'I'm free of all prejudices. I hate everyone equally.'). The day I believe that I have overcome all my prejudices and assumptions is the day that I disappear into a puff of impossibility. One of the most important characteristics of prejudices is that they are deeply ingrained, they have become habitual ways of thinking that we barely notice, let alone question, and are amongst the most significant barriers we confront when pursuing the art of living.

There is a well-known video clip that is frequently used to demonstrate the pervasiveness of racial stereotypes. The film

cuts back and forth between a white man running and a black man running through the streets in some kind of police chase. White audiences invariably believe that it is a white plain-clothes police officer chasing a black criminal. But to their surprise they discover in the end that it is the other way around. If I am walking in a dark street at night, I find that I am more wary of young black men than young white men, and am more likely to cross to the other side of the road to avoid a group of black youths. Clearly, part of me assumes that black men are more likely to be muggers. I realise that this is a classic racial stereotype but it is a prejudice that I have found difficult to overcome (even though the only time I was mugged it was by two white guys). Today you can witness an almost visible shiver of fear whenever any bearded Asian man with a rucksack walks into a London tube carriage; obviously he's a potential terrorist and suicide bomber. Prejudice and assumptions are a part of daily life and deepening your empathy with others will help erode them.

The three pathways to empathy - learning, conversation and experience - are all challenging and rewarding journeys in their own ways. I would like to begin with learning, which is the easiest to incorporate into daily life, then follow this with conversation, which is usually more difficult to pursue, and finish with experience, possibly the most demanding pathway of all.

Empathy through learning

The most common way to discover the perspectives of others is by learning about them through books, films, plays, photos, and other artworks and information sources. The most enlightening are generally those that attempt to portray the particular viewpoint of an individual, as in the case of first-person narratives or self-portraiture. This takes us into the realm of subjective experience rather than objective truths; the eye of the

beholder rather than the view from nowhere. Some sources, particularly films, also illustrate the process of people deepening their empathy, providing models that may inspire our own actions. Although the approach of learning is 'indirect' in that we may never meet the individuals we hope to empathise with, it is a powerful way of opening up our minds to unknown and distant lives.

In the Western world, the history of empathy through books begins with the invention of autobiography, which is often dated to the sixteenth century. A pioneering work was *The Memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini, Written By Himself*, composed in 1558 in Florence, where the author was a well-known goldsmith and sculptor. Cellini's memoirs are so full of boastfulness, self-conceit and outright falsehoods that it is difficult to gain deep insights into how he really saw himself and his society. Far more revealing are the *Essays* by the French aristocrat Michel de Montaigne, the first volumes of which appeared in 1580. Compared with Cellini, Montaigne is far more honest, modest and self-aware. Rather than presenting a chronological narrative of his life, Montaigne's essays take the form of reflections on an extraordinary range of themes, including idleness, friendship, cannibals, the custom of wearing clothes, farting, experience, imagination, impotence and education. Through these subjects he investigates and challenges himself, his beliefs, his emotions, and his responses, guided by the question he had inscribed on a medal in 1576: *Que sçais-je?* What do I know? His essays show not only the mind of a sixteenth-century European nobleman, but also of an explorer who was more interested in discovering himself than distant lands. Yet the self he discovered was a place familiar to all, for 'every man bears the whole stamp of the human condition'.

The tradition of autobiography that can be traced back to Montaigne has had enormous influence in helping us imagine the lives of strangers, be they from different cultures, generations, occupations or historical periods. Autobiographical works by Benjamin Franklin, Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma

Gandhi, Anne Frank, Nelson Mandela and many others have transported us and changed us.

Many people have been inspired by the writings of Helen Keller, a deaf-blind woman whose autobiography *The Story of My Life* has been a bestseller since its publication in 1903. Her essay 'The Seeing Hand', which appeared five years later, shows the hidden realities of her world: 'My hand is to me what your hearing and sight together are to you. In large measure we travel the same highways, read the same books, speak the same language, yet our experiences are different...Remember that you, dependent on your sight, do not realize how many things are tangible. All palpable things are mobile or rigid, solid or liquid, big or small, warm or cold, and these qualities are variously modified. The coolness of a water-lily rounding into bloom is different from the coolness of an evening wind in summer, and different again from the coolness of the rain that soaks into the hearts of growing things and gives them life and body. The velvet of the rose is not that of a ripe peach or of a baby's dimpled cheek. The hardness of the rock is to the hardness of wood what a man's deep bass is to a woman's voice when it is low. What I call beauty I find in certain combinations of all these qualities, and is largely derived from the flow of curved and straight lines which is over all things.'

Whereas we may think of the world of a deaf-blind person as one of silence and darkness, Helen Keller reminds us that it can be filled with beauty and subtlety. Moreover, this insight into her personal experience may encourage us to expand our own sense experiences, to become more aware of the texture of the cheek we lovingly touch, the scent of a ripe tomato, or the changing tone of a close friend's voice. This is the power of empathy through learning.

Just as important as the autobiographies of famous individuals have been the stories of the less eminent, often brought to life through the testimony of oral histories. The gathering of life narratives, particularly from the poor, exploited and marginalised, has been increasingly popular since the 1950s.

The Children of Sanchez (1959), by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, provided extraordinary insights into life in the slums of Mexico City. When the oral historian Studs Terkel published *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (1972), the first-person narratives opened up the lives and emotions of steel workers, policemen, prostitutes, bus drivers, dentists, hair stylists, lawyers and dozens of other workers in the United States.

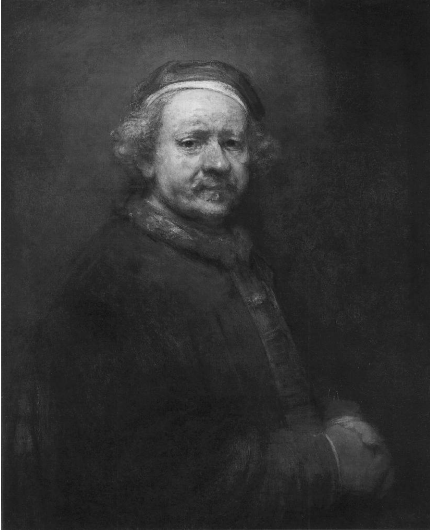
One of my personal favourites is *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1984), in which the Nobel Peace Prize winner gives a human face to life as a poor, indigenous woman in Guatemala during the country's civil war in the 1970s and 1980s. Its unforgettable and iconic opening lines are: 'My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty-three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people. It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times, but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.'

Reading the story of Rigoberta Menchú helped inspire me to discover the realities of Guatemala's civil war for myself and to do human rights work in the country's remote jungle areas with refugees who had originally fled the army's genocide against indigenous Mayans.

The fictional equivalent of oral history is the psychological novel, where we are invited to enter the mind of a character and to travel through the story using their eyes. In Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) the story is told from the perspective of five individuals, with all the dialogue and action being submerged in their thoughts. The originality of the book is that the reader is given access to nothing but the inner worlds of the characters. I once spoke out at a lecture by a famous scholar of Woolf, playfully suggesting that this book fails because all the characters

sound the same; any differences in their perspectives are overridden by them all coming across as pretentious bourgeois intellectuals in inter-war Britain, just like the author. She responded as if I had committed blasphemy, with a sharp put down that exposed my ignorance of modernist literature. Nevertheless, I still think that *The Waves* highlights one of the problems of empathy in the novel, for in attempting to depict the viewpoints and consciousness of others, the author will inevitably project their own perspectives, experiences, and assumptions onto their characters. When I wrote a novel, I found myself trapped by the limits of my own experience and imagination.

Images also have a long history of providing insights into how others look at the world. In art, self-portraiture, and portraiture more generally, is an opportunity to interpret the thoughts and emotions of the subject, to see life through their eyes. Rembrandt knew that a single image was not enough to embrace the whole worldview and experience of an individual, so he produced almost a hundred pictures of himself in different guises. I find many of his self-portraits enigmatic, including this one done just before his death, in 1669. I cannot tell how much this painting is about sadness and regret, and whether he felt his life had been wasted. Perhaps, however, this is an ambiguity he intentionally wished to communicate.



Although a stimulus to the empathetic imagination, traditional self-portraiture and portraiture rarely display the multiplicity of people's personalities, their contradictions and assumptions, the variety of their secrets and dreams. Ultimately the main use of reflecting upon and responding to a portrait may be to discover more about ourselves.

In the twentieth century, the photographic image became more important than painting as a means of visually revealing the perspectives of others. This photo of gold miners in the Serra Pelada in Brazil by Sebastião Salgado is a commentary on how he views the world: it is a place of hellish slavery, where Dante's *Inferno* is a reality rather than a poem. His photos of children provoke other thoughts: why does he want us to see poor children dressed as angels, with a heavenly sky above? The finest photographers are not just recording an image, snapping a moment in time. They are inviting us to look at the world differently, to expand our ways of seeing.



In her book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag argued that ‘images anaesthetize’, that we are so bombarded by images of the suffering of others that eventually we cease to have an emotional response. This may be true of newspaper photos of starving children in Africa but it is precisely the creativity of photographers such as Salgado that can turn an image into an empathetic revelation.

More than this, we can focus our interpretation on the image-maker more than the image itself. Give two people a camera each and ask them to photograph their neighbourhood, and they will return with different images, evidence of their unique vision and understanding.

By depicting the passage of time, film can provide empathetic insights that are denied to painting and photography. In particular, it is possible to show how individuals have undergone processes of deepening their own empathy with others. A famous example is explored in *Schindler's List*, a film based on the life of Oskar Schindler, a German businessman who lived in occupied Cracow during the Second World War. At the beginning of the film Schindler is portrayed as a loyal supporter of the Nazi regime and wears a swastika pinned to his lapel. He wants to set up a factory producing field kitchenware and mess kits for the German Army and asks a Jewish accountant, Itzhak Stern (who has experience in the industry), to help him. At this stage Schindler treats his relationship with Stern as nothing more than a means to the end of establishing a successful business and taking opportunity of the war economy. When starting up the factory, Stern tells Schindler that using Jewish workers would be cheaper than employing Poles but points out that all the wages of the Jews go directly to the SS. Schindler, however, is oblivious to the humanitarian issue that the Jews would be working as slave labour: he simply wants them as they would be cheaper. Although Schindler is not the kind of person who expresses open hatred of Jews, he initially treats his Jewish workers with indifference, as a faceless mass

without individuality, rights or equal worth to gentiles such as himself.

Schindler's character transforms as the film progresses. Clearly pleased that his new factory is operating so well, he calls Stern into his office, offers him a drink, and declares, 'My father was fond of saying you need three things in life. A good doctor, a forgiving priest and a good accountant.' He raises his glass to his accountant. It is the beginning of an unlikely friendship. From this point on, the relationship between them develops more profoundly. Schindler saves Stern from being transported to the death camps, and later smuggles him food and other valuable items when he is forced to live and work in a camp in Plaszow run by the sadistic commandant Amos Goeth. The fact that Schindler is now willing to take personal risks for Stern is evidence that he has come to empathise with him as a human being.



Liam Neeson as Oskar Schindler and Ben Kingsley as Itzhak Stern in *Schindler's List*. The mandatory Star of David is just visible on Stern's coat.

A parallel plot is the way that Schindler feels increasingly compelled to protect and help his factory workers, whose names and lives he has gradually come to know. When he finds out

that they are to be transported to Auschwitz, he bribes Goeth (at huge financial cost to himself) so that they and their families are sent instead to a new, effectively fictitious, munitions factory that Schindler is setting up across the border in Czechoslovakia. These 1200 people are put on a list - Schindler's List - and are saved from the death camps. The film ends with the following words appearing on the screen: 'There are fewer than five thousand Jews left alive in Poland today. There are more than six thousand descendents of the Schindler Jews.'

Why does Schindler decide to save his Jewish workers, risking his own life in the process? In my view, it is not simply because he feels some general sense of compassion for them or believes that their treatment by the Nazis is a gross injustice. An alternative explanation is that he has, over time, come to know his employees as individuals, has had personal encounters with them, and appreciates that they have hopes, fears and passions like anybody else. But it is more than this. His relationship with Stern is the key that opens him up to empathising with them. Once the Jewish accountant Stern becomes an individual and friend in his eyes, Schindler makes an empathetic leap to the collective, so all his labourers cease to be faceless Jews. Each of them must be treated as a unique human being. Towards the very end of the film, Schindler introduces Stern to his wife with the words, 'Stern is my accountant and friend'. This may be Schindler's greatest expression of humanity and the most significant line in the film.

Schindler's List, then, is not the story of an 'altruistic personality', somebody who rescues his Jewish workers out of some deep and natural moral sensibility. It is the story of a person who gradually learns to empathise and relate to his labourers as individuals. As soon he grants them humanity, he feels compelled to assist them. But without his friendship with Itzhak Stern, Schindler may never have escaped his initial disregard of the Jews. There are several messages here: that our ability to empathise is not fixed but can change and develop through time; that personal relationships are a source of

empathetic transformation; and that recognising the individuality of other people can inspire us to take action on their behalf.

Exposing ourselves to books, paintings, photographs, films, and other arts and information sources remains a vital means of discovering how other people see the world, especially those in distant places who we are unlikely ever to meet or those whose lives are so different from our own that we will never experience what they go through for ourselves. In this sense, cultural learning becomes a form of travel into the minds of others, taking our empathic imaginings into unexpected and unknown realms.

But which realms, and which people, would you like to discover? In this age of the internet and information overload, the choices may seem overwhelming. You might wish to try some of the following:

- *Films:* In addition to *Schindler's List*, watch other films in which learning to see the world from the perspective of others and stepping into their shoes is a major theme, such as: *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Being John Malkovich*, *Gandhi* and *Trading Places*. More recent examples are the two films directed by Clint Eastwood that depict, respectively, the Japanese and American experiences of the Battle of Iwo Jima in the Second World War: *Letters from Iwo Jima* and *Flags of Our Fathers*.
- *Books and websites:* The recommended readings and websites at the end of this essay will stimulate your empathetic thinking. The Oxford Muse website, for instance, contains a gallery of 'written portraits' of people from many countries and backgrounds talking about their lives and emotions in their own words. You could tailor your reading to fill gaps in your understanding or to explore familiar territory in fresh ways. Before travelling to new places I endeavour to

read oral histories of the people who live there to help me get beyond the anodyne and impersonal commentary of standard tourist guides. I am also currently attempting to shed my ignorance about where I live by reading a study of the Pakistani Muslim community in my own city.

- *Art and Photography*: Artists whose work particularly encourages thinking about life from the perspective of others include: Rembrandt, especially his self-portraits; Salvador Dalí, who explores his own unconscious; Freida Kahlo, whose autobiographical painting depicts her pain and suffering; and Antony Gormley, whose sculptures explore the meaning of his own body. Amongst the endless choice of photographers you could start with social documentary photographers such as Sebastião Salgado, Don McCullin, Roman Vishniac, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Lewis Hine.
- *Games*: If you would rather recreation, you can download the interactive video game PeaceMaker, which is designed to develop empathy and an understanding of multiple perspectives around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. You can choose to be on either side and must make political, military and economic decisions in response to suicide bombs, social protests and the flux of world events. Beware: your failure could lead to a new Intifada.

Empathy through conversation

Most of us live in a small world of friends, family and acquaintances, surrounded by strangers about whom we know little. These are not just people who live on the fringes of society, out of sight and out of mind, such as asylum seekers or

elderly folk confined to nursing homes. It also includes individuals we see every day but make little effort to engage with. Perhaps you don't know the name of the woman who delivers your post each morning and have barely spoken to the quiet librarian living across the road. And what about that guy you see cycling past your house every day with a cello case on his back? There are others who never seem to cross our paths. Maybe you have never met a prison guard or a wealthy insurance broker. Do you know anyone with a terminal illness? Until recently I had never met anybody who works at the car factory near my home, even though it employs thousands of people, many of whom live in neighbouring streets. We are stranded from each other on an interconnected planet.

It is difficult to empathise with people we don't know. We can only guess at what is happening inside their heads. One of the most interesting and easiest ways to cross the barrier and develop empathy with a stranger is simply to have a conversation with them.

Last Saturday I was walking along the High Street in Oxford, where I live, when I saw a dishevelled man coming towards me. He wore thick, cheap plastic glasses, his hair was matted, his clothes unkempt. He was also muttering to himself through decaying, broken teeth. He received strange looks from the passing shoppers and I could see them stepping aside so they did not have to brush him. He stopped me and asked if I could help him. 'What do you need?' I responded. 'I've run out of cigarettes. And I've got no money.' So I replied, 'How much do you need for cigarettes?' 'Three quid.' I took out my wallet and handed him four pounds. He said he only needed three. I insisted he take it all. He thanked me and we parted.

Why did I give him this money? Because I know him. And I like him.



His name is Alan Human and he is, amongst other things, a paranoid schizophrenic with a history of violence. Alan has lived on the streets for years and has been locked up in psychiatric hospitals seventeen times, certified insane under Section 3 of the Mental Health Act. Now in his fifties, few people know that he has a degree in philosophy, politics and economics from Oxford University. Alan has one of the most acute and original minds of anyone I know but most people simply consider him - if they consider him at all - as a homeless nutcase.

I met Alan a few years ago when I was working at The Oxford Muse foundation on a project creating written portraits of people in the city, individuals whose voices are rarely heard, whose thoughts and experiences of life are often ignored. It involved having two extensive recorded conversations with him (each of around three hours), in which we spoke together about how we looked at ourselves and the world. Amongst the topics we discussed were how our priorities had changed over the years, what we had learned about love in the course of our lives, and how we overcame our fears. The conversations were a mutual sharing of our approaches to the art of living rather than a one-way interrogation focused on his mental illness. I edited the transcripts into a portrait of him speaking about his life in his own words. Once he had agreed on the text it was published on The Oxford Muse website. Later his portrait (which he really loved) appeared in a book and, to his delight, was adapted for a play. He often introduces himself to people by showing them

his portrait, to help them get beyond their initial assumptions and prejudices about him.

Since I created the portrait, we frequently bump into each other on the street and talk moral philosophy, and occasionally go out for lunch. Sometimes Alan sends me notes in the post on his latest philosophical musings. He very rarely asks for money when I see him, although he is living an extremely meagre existence on social security and is almost perpetually short of cash. I know that if he asks, he really needs it. And I know that the cigarettes are in a very good cause. He says he requires around a hundred cigarettes a day to feel stable, and can quote academic research showing that psychotics need to self-medicate using nicotine. And in case you wanted to know more about his name, this is what he once told me: 'In 1980 I changed my name by deed pole. I had six children with different surnames and I thought what we should do is go for our common humanity, the lowest common denominator, so I changed my name from Alan Lewis to Alan Human. Two of my ex-wives, and two of my children, are christened or took the name Human for a time. But now they've all reverted to their other names, so I'm the only Human left in our family.'

My friendship with Alan has altered several aspects of my life. Most surprisingly, talking with Alan played a decisive role in convincing me to try being a vegetarian. His arguments were more morally compelling than any others I had found. In fact, I have been influenced more generally by his rigorous mode of thinking. He is remarkably analytical, inspiring me to sharpen my own lazy thinking and arguments, especially on ethical issues.

Knowing Alan has made me less likely to judge people by their appearances and has expanded my curiosity. I simply engage more with people now, convinced that almost everybody has interesting and unusual ideas and experiences that will broaden my own perspectives. So I talk with waiters, businessmen, plumbers, priests. I have also developed a better relationship with one of my relatives who suffers from

schizophrenia. I have a deeper understanding of what she is going through and have become more sympathetic towards her, more tolerant of her obsessions, and more willing to learn from her. Finally, the most obvious effect of knowing Alan is that when I walk by someone living on the street or begging for money, I am now much more likely to treat them as a human being. I will stop and talk or, at the very least, look them in the eye and acknowledge them. These encounters, while sometimes brief, make me feel more human, more connected to both the world and myself.

Apart from creating written Portraits at The Oxford Muse, I also organised 'Conversation Meals': diners sit in pairs with a stranger and are given a Menu of Conversation to guide their discussion, containing questions on many aspects of life such as 'What are the limits of your compassion?' or 'In what ways do you wish to become more courageous?' The results are remarkable: by sharing their most important thoughts, beliefs, hopes and experiences, participants not only learn about others, but are stimulated to have fresh ideas and discover new things about themselves. The meals are the opposite of speed-dating, with people talking to each other for two hours rather than two minutes. There are almost no reports of conversation partners become bored with each other or ending up in a heated argument.

These meals played a decisive role in helping me overcome perhaps my greatest prejudice, which is the disdain I have had for people who are very wealthy. For many years, especially in my late teens and twenties, when I met someone who was from a wealthy background or had an upper class accent, I immediately assumed that I would not like them, that they were a snob, that they lacked compassion. My struggles to overcome this response began through doing extensive interviews with rich Guatemalan plantation owners for my doctoral thesis: some of them I came to like, even those who had supported the brutal military regime in the 1970s and 1980s. The Conversation Meals at The Oxford Muse challenged me further. Through them I

took part in many highly personal dialogues with people from different classes, occupations and cultures - including wealthy business people and rich heiresses. This experience made me truly understand - in reality rather than just theory - that it is not always easy to be rich, for the rich suffer just as everyone else from loneliness, fear, anxiety, lack of self-confidence, unrequited love and other problems of life.

Not all of us meet someone like Alan Human every day or have the opportunity to attend Conversation Meals. So what more can we all do to empathise with people who we might ordinarily ignore or pass by, or those whose inner lives and thoughts remain otherwise hidden from us? I think the most important approach is to wean ourselves off superficial talk and engage in real conversations where we take off our masks and say who we really are. I have found that the most satisfying conversations are a mutual exchange taking place on a one-to-one basis, where there is plenty of time to explore, but small group discussions can also be inspiring. Talking with others should become a form of adventure. But how?

- *At home:* You might wish to invent your own version of Conversation Meals. When people come to my home for dinner, they are often presented with a small bowl containing cut outs of headlines from the local newspaper, which we each pick out at random. Rather than using cuttings such as 'Motorway Repairs Planned' we choose more interesting ones like 'Unexpected Triumph' or 'Hidden Agendas'. We then, in turn, use our headline as a conversational opening, saying something about how it relates to an aspect of our life or future plans. It means that we don't always end up talking about work and house prices. Usually the conversations take unexpected directions, with the unveiling of beautiful memories, the gentle revelation of fears and anxieties, and the discovery of shared emotions or hopes that draw us all together.

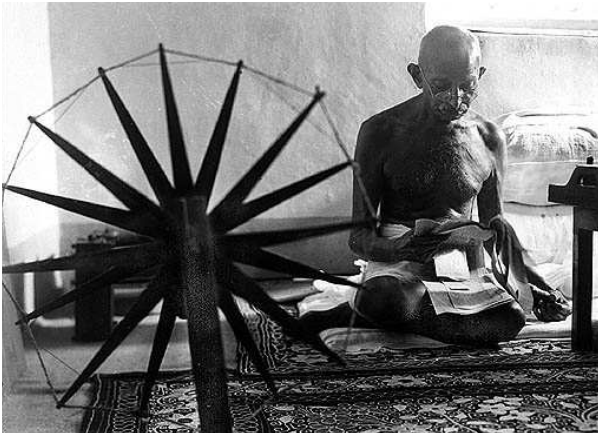
- *At work:* The most noisy and buzzing office environment is enveloped by a huge silence, which is the unspoken emotions and personal lives of the people who work there. Most of us suppress who we are while at work, hiding behind our job title and fearing that revealing our inner selves will be considered a sign of weakness or subject us to unwanted ridicule or attention. Talking openly to a work colleague - or even your boss - might make you feel vulnerable, but once you tell them about your unhappiness, loneliness or dreams, and invite their response and experiences, you are likely to find not only that they are understanding but that they have faced similar problems or dilemmas themselves. At the same time, you might learn that you were wrong about the reason why they are sometimes aggressive towards you in meetings and that they do not ignore your emails on purpose.
- *On the street:* An intrepid conversational adventurer will take their conversational courage into the streets. Try sharing more of your life with your local newsagent, traffic warden or street sweeper, and asking them about theirs. Instead of 'How are you?' invent more interesting greetings such as 'What have you been thinking about this morning?' or 'What was the most surprising thing that happened to you last week?' The enthusiastic responses and warmth you receive will help overcome any embarrassment you feel about asking such unusual questions. And if anybody asks you, 'How are you?' instead of saying 'fine' or 'not bad' you could surprise them by giving the real answer. As a result of your mutual exchange you may have resolved one of the great difficulties we all face: the feeling of being alone with our own suffering. And you may even have found a new friend.

Empathy through experience

In around 1206, the twenty-three year old son of a wealthy merchant went on a pilgrimage to the Basilica of St Peter's in Rome. He could not help noticing the contrast between the opulence and lavishness within the basilica, and the poverty of the beggars sitting outside its doors. He persuaded a beggar to exchange clothes with him and spent the rest of the day in rags asking for alms. Not long after, when he was out riding near his home town, he met a leper. Lepers were the outcasts of medieval society, and were both shunned and despised. Many were hideously deformed and crippled, with missing noses and bleeding sores. They were forbidden to enter towns and to drink from wells or springs. Nobody would touch them for fear of contracting their dreaded disease. But the young man forced himself to stifle his immediate feeling of revulsion of lepers, which he had harboured since childhood. He dismounted his horse, gave the leper a coin and kissed his hand. The leper kissed him in return. This episode was a turning point in the man's life. He soon founded a new religious order whose brothers worked in the leper houses and who gave up their worldly goods to live and preach in poverty. St Francis of Assisi is remembered for declaring, 'Grant me the treasure of sublime poverty: permit the distinctive sign of our order to be that it does not possess anything of its own beneath the sun, for the glory of your name, and that it have no other patrimony than begging.'

Like St Francis, Mahatma Gandhi was one of the great empathisers of human history. He too had an encounter with a leper, who came to his door when he was living in South Africa. As he recounts in his autobiography: 'I had not the heart to dismiss him with a meal. So I offered him shelter, dressed his wounds, and began to look after him.' Not long afterwards Gandhi began helping two hours a day as a nurse in a local

hospital, while still working as a barrister. Later, during the Boer War, he again volunteered as a nurse, tending sick and wounded soldiers. Gandhi returned to India and in 1912 established the Tolstoy Farm where, similar to the Franciscan Order, 'our ambition was to live the life of the poorest people'. Part of this experiment in poverty and empathy was for each member of the ashram to help clean the toilets, a task that was normally only undertaken by low caste Untouchables. For Gandhi, having the experiences of the poorest and most outcast members of society was not only a moral imperative but also a way of life from which he drew strength and inspiration.



George Orwell, best known for his dystopian novel *1984*, is a third important figure in the history of empathy. In the late 1920s, aged twenty-five, he defied his own privileged background (he had gone to school at Eton) by working first as a kitchen hand in a Parisian hotel, and then living as a tramp in London, attempting to survive on the streets. At the end of *Down and Out in Paris and London* he admits that he has only seen 'the fringe of poverty' but he can still 'point to one or two things I have definitely learned by being hard up': 'I shall never again think that all tramps are drunken scoundrels, nor expect a

beggar to be grateful when I give him a penny, nor be surprised if men out of work lack energy, nor subscribe to the Salvation Army, nor pawn my clothes, nor refuse a handbill, nor enjoy a meal in a smart restaurant. That is a beginning.'

Few of us are likely to become Franciscan monks or move to a Gandhian ashram in India. But it may be possible, like George Orwell, to conduct some temporary experiments in living the life of others.

One of my own recent experiments was when I worked for several months as a part-time garden assistant at an Oxford college. This was interesting not simply because I developed a much closer relationship with nature. I also found out what it was like not to be valued as a human being. Like the other assistants, I was paid around seven pounds an hour. This struck me as pitifully low, especially given that we all had professional horticultural qualifications. Additionally, it seemed that the academics and students took almost no notice of us. It was astonishing how often people would simply walk past as I was weeding on my hands and knees without saying hello, and it was wonderful on the rare occasions when somebody stopped to comment on how lovely the garden was looking. (It is, in my view, one of the most beautiful, original and artistic gardens in the city, largely thanks to the vision of the Head Gardener.) Finally, although we were provided with a free lunch, we were not allowed to sit at the same table as the academic staff. In the dining hall they sat on an elevated platform, known as High Table, whereas the gardeners and clerical staff sat at their own table lower down, with the students seated separately. Porters, cleaners and maintenance staff were not even permitted to attend the main lunch sitting, and had to come earlier and were given inferior food. I noticed only one professor who would regularly break ranks and join our table; he was clearly uncomfortable with this ridiculous hierarchical distinction. I imagine that few of the academics realised that not only had I been a student at Oxford, I had also worked as a university lecturer and often dined at Oxbridge High Tables. For most of

them I was only a gardener. Not someone they despised. Just someone they ignored.

What did I learn from these experiences? Apart from them giving me evidence that Oxford colleges remain bastions of feudalism, the main thing I discovered, very clearly, was how much I need respect. The poor wages were not the main problem. It was that I did not feel that the academics and students made much effort to acknowledge us as human beings, or to take interest in our work. They rarely demonstrated respect for the gardeners. Although I am not the kind of person who goes out of their way to seek recognition or approval from others, I found that the lack of respect diminished me in a very subtle way that I had not expected. My self-respect slowly began to dissolve and I felt a creeping sense of apathy and worthlessness.

Pursuing the path of empathy through experience is one of the most difficult challenges of the art of living. It can take time, effort and sacrifice to do so seriously, and is generally more demanding than the pathways of learning or conversation. The great virtue is that experience is so tangible: what you do will be etched on your body forever. Some people dedicate their lives to it; most of us will not. But there may be particular groups of people or individuals whose lives you feel you could or should experience in some way, perhaps for a short period. They are likely to fall into five main groups, based on dependency, deprivation, criticism, allegiance and ignorance.

- *Dependency*: You may choose to experience the lives of people who you depend upon in some way. If you work in an office, you might decide to volunteer as a cleaner one morning a month as a way of empathising with those who are cleaning the carpets or toilets on your behalf and probably for a very low wage. My gardening sojourn was partly an attempt to discover the daily lives of those who are responsible for creating the Oxford college gardens whose beauty I have enjoyed for so

many years. I hope my next adventure will be to work or volunteer as a care assistant in an old people's home, for one day I will be amongst the elderly and require help from the carers.

- *Deprivation:* Some people feel a strong moral imperative to find out more about what it is like to live on the social margins, to be deprived in a way that they may never have experienced for themselves. Like St Francis, you could, for instance, try begging on the streets for a day, and see whether you can maintain your self-respect and dignity during the process. Or you could force yourself to live off £59.15 per week for a month, which is the level of unemployment benefit (Job Seeker's Allowance) for a single adult in the UK. Alternatively you could embark on a 'deprivation holiday': some travel agencies and education foundations offer packages where you can work in a developing country picking coffee or teaching English in a remote rural primary school (usually as a volunteer).
- *Criticism:* There is a Native American proverb which says, 'Walk a mile in another man's moccasins before you criticise him.' If you find yourself being extremely critical of certain people, could you discover a way of wearing their moccasins for a while? You may, as a result, find yourself liberated from your negative opinion. If you think the guys in the post room at work are incredibly slow and inefficient, why not spend a few lunchtimes helping them out? I once worked for several months as a carpenter and builder. Never again will I complain about trades people taking lots of tea breaks: without regular breaks you are in danger of becoming physically exhausted, losing concentration and making mistakes.

- *Allegiance:* We all have allegiances, whether it be to football teams, religions, nations or other communities. These allegiances are often a source of prejudice and it can be a healthy exercise to challenge them. The next time you are at a football match against your arch enemy, you could sit amongst their supporters and see whether they really deserve the abuse that is usually hurled at them. A friend of mine used to attend religious services from a different faith every week to help counter and broaden her own beliefs. I stopped celebrating the Australia Day holiday once I realised that I was in fact commemorating the invasion of a country by a colonial power and the decimation of its indigenous inhabitants. I would like all of us to learn each other's national dances and to cook each other's national dishes.
- *Ignorance:* You may simply feel ignorant about different ways of living or being, and wish to broaden your experience of life. You could follow the path of someone I know who was tired of sitting in front of a computer all day and indulged her desire to try manual work by taking an evening course in plumbing. She liked it so much she left her office job to become a full-time plumber and heating engineer; she particularly loves the freedom of her new career and the opportunity to meet people from different cultures and backgrounds. Perhaps you have a friend who is blind and you want to understand more about what it is like to be him. Could you ask him to take you on a personal tour of his favourite city or art gallery, with you wearing a blindfold for the day?

Mass empathy and social change

We usually think of empathising as something that happens at the level of individual relationships: I come to see the world from your perspective and may, as a result, start to treat you differently or relate to other people in new ways. But sometimes it can become a mass phenomenon that brings about large-scale social change. Many of the most important shifts in history have taken place not when there has been a change in governments, laws or economic systems, when there has been a change in the social fabric of empathy. That is, when significant numbers of individuals share new learning, conversations or experiences that alter their understanding of particular groups of people, and which provoke a major practical response.

Although you may think this is a subject for historians, it is also of relevance to the art of living. This is because participation in such empathetic mass movements is a way of helping you escape from your own isolation and making you feel that your actions are contributing to a greater good. It provides the kind of meaning which is essential for living a joyful and fulfilled life. Here is not the place, however, for detailed analysis of how empathy has changed human history. I wish to give only a single example to help you understand that stepping into someone else's shoes can be a radical act bringing extraordinary benefits to the lives of others.

The British struggle against slavery and the slave trade

Throughout history people have bought and sold human beings, treating them as objects of private property. Britain was one of the countries most responsible for the horrors of slavery when it was at its height in the eighteenth century. In the 1780s around half a million African slaves were being systematically worked to death on sugar plantations in British colonies in the West Indies, and Britain was the dominant force in the international slave

trade. After a protracted period of social struggle beginning around 1787, the slave trade was finally abolished in 1807 and slavery itself ended in the British Empire in 1838 (although it still continues today in countries such as Brazil, India and China).

There are different interpretations of how and why this change took place. The traditional view was that the actions of the British parliamentarian William Wilberforce were the most significant factor in bringing an end to slavery. More modern analysis emphasises the revolts by slaves themselves, and the role of the Anglican deacon Thomas Clarkson and a group of highly active Quakers who spearheaded the mass movement against slavery.

These explanations fail to recognise the crucial role of empathy. According to the historian Adam Hochschild in his book *Bury The Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery*, the campaign against slavery relied upon a 'sudden upwelling' of human empathy among the British public, remarkable for the fact that 'it was the first time a large number of people became outraged, and stayed outraged for many years, over someone else's rights'. But what explains this sudden upwelling, and why didn't this response arise in other European countries? Hochschild argues that there was something that set Britain apart: 'People are more likely to care about the suffering of others in a distant place if that misfortune evokes a fear of their own. And late-eighteenth century Britons were in the midst of a widespread firsthand experience with a kind of kidnapping and enslavement that stood in dramatic contradiction to everything about citizens' rights enshrined in British law. It was arbitrary, violent, and sometimes fatal...It was the practice of naval impressment.'

Since the 1600s the Royal Navy had 'pressed' tens of thousands of seamen into service. This involved press gangs of armed sailors patrolling around British ports and further inland, forcibly taking any sturdy men they could find. Press victims, who were often - although not exclusively - from the working

class, could find themselves effectively enslaved for several years. Campaigners against the slave trade drew direct parallels with the practice of impressment: the British public had an understanding, often from personal or family experience, of what it meant to be enslaved. Hence they could clearly see the cruel injustice of slavery on the sugar plantations. Over a century of social struggle against impressment, writes Hochschild, ‘psychologically set the national stage for the much larger battle over slavery’.



A press
gang at
work,
around
1780

Empathy played a role in the anti-slavery movement in other ways. British factory workers saw similarities between their own exploitation and that of the slaves, with some marching under banners calling for ending slavery ‘both at home and abroad’. Anti-slavery ideas also spread rapidly in Ireland, where there was a shared understanding of what it felt like to be oppressed by the British. A former slave named Olaudah Equiano wrote a bestselling autobiography and toured the country from the late 1780s, speaking to thousands of people about his experience, and giving a human face and personal story to those who had been enslaved. Thomas Clarkson and his colleagues compiled a document, *Abstract of the Evidence*, containing first-hand accounts of slavery that both shocked and educated the public and parliamentarians. The campaigners believed in the capacity of

people to care about the suffering of others and thought that exposing them to the realities of slavery would provoke them to take action against it. Thus Hochschild concludes that the success of the anti-slavery movement was based on the fact that, 'The abolitionists placed their hope not in sacred texts, but in human empathy.'

This is only one of many examples in which empathy has left its trace on history. Another grew out of the evacuation of over a million British children from urban areas to the countryside during the Second World War. For the first time relatively well-off rural people discovered the realities of life in the city slums, because most of the children they were charged to look after were clearly deprived: they were malnourished, they suffered from rickets and lice, they lacked shoes. The result was a surge of empathy which led to new public health, nutritional and education provisions for children. These changes themselves accelerated the development of the welfare state both during and after the war.

A further instance is the impact of Nicaragua's mass literacy campaign in the early 1980s. As part of the new Sandinista government's revolutionary policies, almost 100,000 young people from the cities (mostly student volunteers) had their first major encounter with the acute poverty of the countryside through working as literacy teachers. They lived and ate with peasant families, got to know children and old people, and discovered what it was like to struggle as an agricultural worker. These encounters with the socio-economic and cultural realities of their own country affected the political and empathetic consciousness of an entire generation, and contributed to the growth of vibrant and radical social movements in Nicaragua throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Waves of mass empathy are also part of the more recent past, such as the public reaction in Europe to the Asian tsunamis in late 2004, in which over 230,000 people were killed. There was an unprecedented humanitarian response in terms of

individual donations, far above what would normally be expected after a natural disaster in a distant country. The extent of the response can be explained not only by the scale of the disaster, but by empathy. First, the tsunami took place just after Christmas, a period that Europeans traditionally associate with giving and compassion for the suffering of others (even if their celebrations are a festival of consumption and excess). Second, there were many Western victims who were holidaying at the time in countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka. Tens of thousands of Europeans were sending text messages to check if friends or relatives abroad had been killed or injured. And even if their loved ones were safe, people could easily envision how one of their close friends or children travelling around Asia on a gap year might have lost their lives. Third, extensive video footage from mobile phones and camcorders belonging to victims and survivors that was aired in the international media made it easier to understand the frightening reality of the oncoming wave. These factors helped spark the empathetic imaginations of Europeans, leading to the high levels of donations and other forms of public assistance.



Photos and video footage from mobile phones and camcorders contributed to the empathetic response of Europeans to the Asian tsunami, as did images of Western children.

Social change happens in many ways, from armed struggle to parliamentary reform, from civil disobedience to the invention of new technologies. But we should not forget the role and power of empathy. At particular moments history opens up and provides an opportunity for a revolution in human relationships, in which we overcome the distance between each other and develop new forms of mutual understanding, a microcosmic form of change that can knit our dislocated world together. For many people, when these moments arise, they will not be able to help themselves from becoming participants; they will feel an inner compulsion to act. If we are to live well, and to feel part of a greater whole, we must all look out for these openings, and even try to create them, so we can each take part in creating the history of empathy.

The empathy exhibition

Developing empathy is the great art form of the age of outrospection, and one which we can all practice. You may choose to follow different pathways - learning, conversation or experience - but all of them will lead you to a new vision of the art of living. Your encounters with the worldviews of others will give you new perspectives on your own life. Perhaps your personal problems will no longer seem so overwhelming or you will be inspired to pursue a new career. You may find that you overcome some prejudices along the way and contribute to a wider process of social change. Whatever happens, by making the imaginative leap into the lives of others, you will be taking part in the quiet revolution of human relationships.

The British Shakespearean actress Harriet Walter has written that actors 'are the custodians of another person's thoughts, and must locate them and reproduce them as faithfully as possible. This has nothing to do with interpretation or imitation. Accents and mannerisms are not the point. The exercise is to quieten our own ego and let another person speak.' This approach to acting mirrors the imaginative act of empathising where we attempt to put ourselves in the shoes of another, and allow their thoughts and experiences to become part of us and guide us. It is common in acting for men to play women, rich to play poor, blacks to play whites; we must become as versatile and convincing as the finest actors. As with any actor, our own personality will get in the way of the part we want to play, but with practice the life of another can flow through us, and start to shape not only our bodily movements, but also our thoughts, emotions and how we relate with others on our personal stage. By following the three empathy pathways of learning, conversation and experience we can enlarge our repertoire of roles, develop our stage presence, and make the drama of our lives more interesting and purposeful.

Gandhi's talisman can be thought about as a kind of role play in which you imagine yourself into the life of 'the poorest and weakest man who you may have seen'. But even he realised that we must play many roles. In the 1940s, in the face of growing tensions between Muslims and Hindus in the lead up to Indian independence, he declared to his supporters, 'I am a Muslim, I am a Hindu, I am a Christian, I am Jew - and so are all of you.' He understood that without empathy we are condemning ourselves to a world of conflict and intolerance.

Our culture is one which generally reserves its greatest praise for those who are considered beautiful, who are fine athletes, who have earned great fortunes, who have successfully climbed the ladders of power and success. I would like society to change its focus, and to bestow more of its praise on those who are engaged in the struggle to understand the perspectives of strangers, to overcome their prejudices, to challenge the assumptions they have about people. Perhaps those who have done most to change their worldviews could be awarded a Nobel Prize for Empathy.

I also have an ambition to create a new kind of gallery for looking at the world through the eyes of others. There would be several rooms in this gallery of human relationships:

Room 1: All The World's A Stage

Professional actors would involve you in dramatic role plays, improvisations and other acting exercises to help you discover the secrets of stepping into the moccasins of another person.

Room 2: Empathetic Adventurers

This would house exhibits and show films on the lives of inspirational empathetic adventurers such as St Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi, Florence Nightingale, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela.

Room 3: Cut-Make-Trim

This room would contain twenty sewing machines and a team of former sweatshop factory workers who would teach you how to make a shirt under the working conditions of your favourite high street label.

Room 4: Dressing Up Box

Here you would find clothes you can dress up in to experience lives you have never tried. There would be appropriate attire so you could go and beg for an hour at the gallery entrance or help sweep and mop the gallery floors and toilets.

Room 5: Conversation Exchange

This room would have conversation booths where you could talk to people like Alan Human or other visitors about hope, friendship, love and curiosity. There would also be live internet phone links to teenagers in war-torn countries or regions being affected by climate change-induced droughts or flooding, who you could speak with about their experiences and share some of your own.

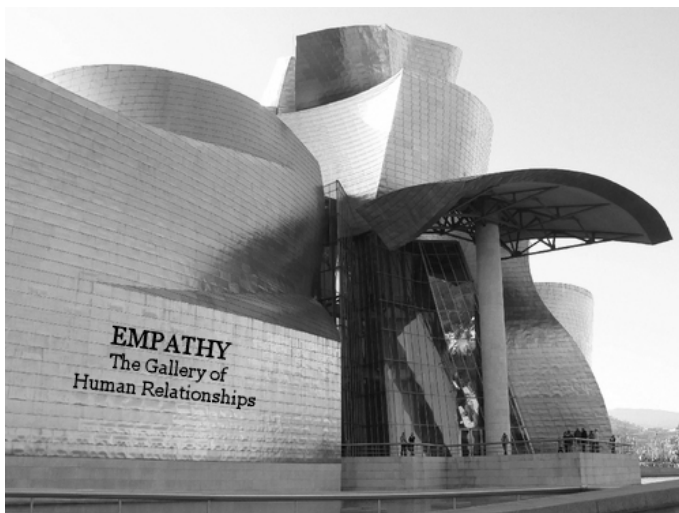
Room 6: Hidden Voices

Here you could listen to oral recordings of people from many walks of life and moments in history, such as former slaves from the American South, rich bankers from New York and Tokyo, teachers from the Nicaraguan literacy campaign, asylum seekers and prisoners on death row.

Room 7: Dreaming Centre

Just before you reach the exit there would be a Dreaming Centre in which you sit back and contemplate how your encounters and experiences at the gallery might change what you do when you wake up the following morning.

I hope that you would like to visit.



Further reading on empathy

Adam Hochschild *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery*

Alfie Kohn *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life*

Berthold Brecht 'A Worker Reads History' in *Poems 1913-1956*

Colin Ward *The Child in the City*

Edmund O. Wilson *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species*

George Orwell *Down and Out in Paris and London* and 'Down the Mine' in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*

Harriet Walter *Other People's Shoes: Thoughts on Acting*

Mahatma Gandhi *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*

Martin Buber *I and Thou* and 'Distance and Relation' in *The Knowledge of Man*

Rigoberta Menchú *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*

Philip L. Jackson, Eric Brunet, Andrew N. Meltzoff and Jean Decety 'Empathy examined through the neural mechanisms involved in imagining how I feel versus how you feel pain', *Neuropsychologia* (2005)

Tzvetan Todorov *The Fragility of Goodness: Why Bulgaria's Jews Survived the Holocaust*

Ursula Le Guin 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow' and 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*

Theodore Zeldin *Conversation and An Intimate History of Humanity*

Websites on empathy

National Life Story Collection oral history sound archive at the British Library,

www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/nlsc.html

Peace Makers video game based on developing empathy to
resolve the Israeli-Palestine conflict,
www.peacemakergame.com
Roots of Empathy school project in Canada,
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The Oxford Muse Portrait Gallery,
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