

# MAKE OUR GARDEN GROW- CULTIVATING EMPATHY

*We're neither pure, nor wise, nor good. We'll do the best we know.  
We'll build our house and chop our wood. And make our garden grow.*  
From Candide

by Paul M. Klein, University of Pittsburgh

*pmklein@katz.pitt.edu  
Full Paper  
Experiential Track*

## ABSTRACT

*As an AACSB accredited institution, we are required to demonstrate how learning occurs, what steps we might take to ensure learning. With respect to the subject of ethics, the focus is among others, the student mastery of critical concepts. But a more expansive view of ethics is an understanding of how ethical behavior might occur and the enhancements that might motivate or inspire that desired conduct. Perhaps this is the province of psychologists and there is much that can be learned from those who have thought deeply and researched tirelessly to understand how we become attentive to the inner voice that calls us to our better selves. And so it is that psychological research suggests that empathy may be the umbrella trait required to develop our capacity for tolerance, kindness, understanding and forgiveness. Accessing our better selves has become increasingly difficult in a world in which our differences are much more obvious than what we share, but as empathy researcher and Stanford University psychologist Jamil Zaki has come to understand, empathy is the “psychological superglue” that connects people and undergirds cooperation and kindness.*

## INTRODUCTION

**“Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another and feeling with the heart of another.”  
Alfred Adler**

Jamil Zaki is a psychologist at Stanford. In 2017 he completed his book, “Choosing Empathy”. But as he prepared to submit his manuscript to his publisher, there was change afoot in this country that not only gave Zaki pause, but moved him to recast his work under a new identity- “The War for Kindness – Building Empathy in a Fractured World.” In January 2017, Donald Trump became the nation’s 45<sup>th</sup> president, and Zaki was not indifferent to the significance of that moment. As many speculated on what this might mean for this country, it was apparent to Zaki that this might not be a moment in which there would be space for empathy.

For some time people have fretted over the “coarsening of the culture.” We see this coarsening in the halls of government, in business, at school board meetings and too often in places of innocence, those places least expected. There is talk of the need for cultural emollients; anti-bullying and civility training. And of course, as Jamil Zaki might remind us and as considerable research makes clear- we all have the capacity to be empathetic. Empathy is one of our highest qualities. It is the root of most behavior that we associate with goodness. And it is considered to be a core leadership competency.

In his commencement address delivered at MIT in 2017, Apple CEO Tim Cook said, “People will try to convince you that you should keep empathy out of your career. Don’t accept this false premise.” At the time of these remarks, 20% of U.S. employers offered empathy training for managers. But as Zaki noted, in a 2019 survey of 150 CEO’s, over 80% recognized empathy as a key to success. In fact, empathy is increasingly viewed as a hard business skill. Research in the neurobiology of empathy has changed the perception of empathy from a soft skill to a neurobiologically based competency. You might say that soft is the new hard.

Daniel Goleman, author of “Emotional Intelligence” has explained that there are three types of empathy: Cognitive Empathy, which gives us a mental sense of how another person’s thinking works. Emotional empathy, which is best understood as allowing us to tune in to another person’s feelings by tuning in to our own body’s emotional signals. The third variety is Empathetic Concern, when someone expresses caring about another person; a heart to heart connection. MIT Professor Sherry Turkle offered this insight- “Empathy is the act of putting yourself in someone else’s problem in the hopes of understanding, of bridging a gap. It helps us feel in community, not abandoned to anomic isolation. It helps us feel seen and known for who we are.” She speaks of “Radical Humility”, meaning that we might not know (and perhaps we cannot) what someone else is thinking or feeling, but it’s about being open to, willing to learn, that provides the space for empathy. “Empathy keeps us from discounting, dismissing, or even canceling others.”

Former President Barack Obama has spoken of the ability to “recognize ourselves in each other.” He reflected on empathy in these words: “To see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us -the child who is hungry, the steelworker

who's been laid off, the family who lost the entire life they built when the storm came to town. When you think like this. When you choose to broaden your ambit of concern and empathize with the plight of others, whether they are close friends or distant strangers – it becomes harder not to act, harder not to help.”

But how often do people perceive empathy opportunities and how often do they empathize? Who do people empathize with? In “The Experience of Empathy in Everyday Life”, the authors examine research on this concept that views empathy as sharing someone's emotions (an emotional process), taking someone's perspective (a cognitive process), and feeling compassionate and wanting to help (a motivational process). “There is apparently no consensus about whether emotion sharing, perspective taking and compassion are distinct or different sides of the same coin.”

## **EXPERIENCE AS A HARD TEACHER**

Nathan Christiansen is the CEO of Mineral, a company that provides HR and Compliance services to clients across the United States. He is also a member of the Forbes Business Council. In reflecting upon the impact of the societal disruptions and the attendant challenges we have faced, spawned in no small measure by the global pandemic, he found that many of his business clients had embraced a new world view. Specifically, empathy gained a position of prominence, meaning that it was given more than lip service in many quarters. Interestingly, during the week of September 13, 2020, the word “empathy” appeared in more Google searches than at any time since Google began publishing the data in 2004. Two months later, during the week of November 29, “empathy” reached a 15 year high for searches of business content on Google. Many companies launched initiatives to better support their employees, who in increasing numbers were struggling amidst the turmoil that became the backdrop of their lives. These responses were examples of organizational empathy, where companies were attentive to their employee's experiences and found new ways to support them.

The Harvard Business Review developed an Empathy Index. They found that on the basis of the metrics that they used that the ten most empathetic companies increased in value more than twice as much as those at the bottom of the index and generated 50% more earnings, defined by market capitalization, from one year to the next.

## **CLOSING THE GAP**

To understand empathy as a concept is of course a necessary start. But to make real the promise of empathy requires a plan of action. Can empathy be learned? Can it be taught? Is it a skill that can be developed? Research that has been done by Zaki suggests that the desire to grow in empathy can be a driver in cultivating it. (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Vol. 107, No.3, 2014.) Writing in the *Journal of Patient Experience*, Helen Riess, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School and Director of the Empathy and Relational Science Program at Massachusetts General Hospital, observed that “In the past, empathy was considered an inborn trait that could not be taught, but research has shown that this vital human competency is mutable and can be taught.” In a health care context, Dr. Riess noted that a large scale observational study found that “Empathic medical care is associated with many benefits including improved patient experience, adherence to treatment recommendations, better clinical outcomes, fewer medical errors and malpractice claims and higher physician retention.”

### **“Feeling One's Way into the Experience of Another.” (Theodore Lipps)**

As expectations grow for business to answer society's call to address our most vexing social challenges, it appears that a growing number of business schools are implementing curricular changes that will better prepare tomorrow's business leaders to respond to such calls. This recalibration in the care and feeding of future business leaders suggests a new emphasis or focus on awakening the humanist in each business student. To move from self interest to considerations of others; to broaden the ambit of concern; to encourage or motivate a prosocial behavioral response. Can this really be done in the classroom? In a survey of business students in 2012 (Holt and Marques), empathy was the least valued among a set of 10 leadership characteristics. Numerous participants in the survey indicated that empathy was not appropriate in a business setting. Despite this discouraging result, there is evidence that suggests that educational interventions can increase empathy, at least in the case of medical students. (identified as members of a caring profession). In “Teaching Empathy and Ethical Decision Making in Business Schools”, Diane F. Baker, noted that “Educational experiences that encourage empathy can be appropriate in business classes as well because empathy potentially stimulates an expanded search for solutions that have more positive outcomes for those affected by business decisions. “

## **PETER SINGER CALLING**

In the required undergraduate business ethics course that I teach, I bring to students an appeal championed quite passionately by Bioethicist Peter Singer in “Peter Singer’s Solution to World Poverty.” It is an appeal that reliably triggers an emotional response that activates empathic concerns in some, but admittedly few students. The appeal however is one that a clear majority of students find to be off-putting because it asks so much of them. Singer, who is well known for his inclination toward tackling the “big questions” has never been deterred by what might be characterized as indignation and even outrage. And in the context of a business school classroom, these business students offer full throated defenses to their decision to close the door on Singer’s appeal.

In the article “Famine, Affluence and Morality” Singer fully expects that his audience will take up their cudgels, as he argues that people in affluent societies have a duty to help those in famine stricken societies. His position is that giving away significant amounts of our money is not a charitable act which we can choose to perform or not, but a fundamental duty which we are morally bound to fulfill. “The Singer Solution to World Poverty” lands with a thud in the classroom, as students disbelievably try to fathom what it might mean for them to part with most of their money. In its’ original incarnation in 1999, Singer suggested that a family of four with an income of \$50,000, spends about \$30,000 on necessities. That family should donate \$20,000 per year to help the world’s poor. A family earning \$100,000 should earmark \$70,000 to help the poor. What Singer proposes is that money spent on luxuries should be given away. Mind you, this appeal is brought to an audience of business students and although such a proposition might not be well received by students in other schools in the university, business students are more inclined to make the “business case” for why such a proposal is in unfathomable.

In the classroom introduction to the Singer proposal, I provide students with data from the World Health Organization (WHO). The statistics are grim, portraying a world in which millions die every year of hunger and hunger related diseases, with children being the most vulnerable. I ask students if more needs to be done. I ask if this state of affairs is tolerable. To a person, students agree that we must do better, that we must find the resources to alleviate the suffering and death of so many, most of whom live in the developing world, far from our shores.

I then present students with the following premises advanced by Singer to ensure their buy-in, their commitment:

1. Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are bad.
2. If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought morally to do it.
3. We, as citizens living in the developed world have the power (in the form of our relative wealth) to prevent suffering and death without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.

Conclusion: An individual in the western world has a moral obligation to give to famine relief any money they have which is not needed to prevent something else that has comparable moral importance.

The conversation that follows is animated, fretful, skeptical and full of the conflicting emotions that might flow from any challenge that seems to test who we are, what we believe in and what our abiding principles might be. Students might also wonder, and indeed they do, why this problem would be a proper one for consideration in a business school course.

## **A SINGER ASSESSMENT**

The Singer proposition is designed to heighten students’ awareness of their own emotions in decision making. Citing several research studies Diane Baker finds significant evidence that emotions do influence moral judgments. “Research from neuroscience indicates that the initial response to a personal ethical dilemma is automatic, perhaps intuitive, and activates parts of the brain associated with emotion.” (Greene et al; 2001; Kuehne et al; 2015; Tassy et al; 2011). “The brain’s response when observing someone in pain or joy is congruent with the actual response of the person experiencing the pain or joy.” (Baird et al; 2011; Harada et. Al; 2016; Morelli et al; 2014). Jonathan Haidt (The Righteous Mind), has concluded that “conscious, moral reasoning occurs after the decision maker has already experienced an initial, intuitive response to an ethical dilemma.” These intuitive responses are nothing more (or less) than recognition according to psychologist Daniel Kahneman. Kahneman, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics for his work on human judgment and decision making, has observed that “Our intuition about a situation might be correct and it might be wrong, but it’s not operating at the level of conscious thought.”

Erika Weisz, PhD, a postdoctoral fellow in psychology at Harvard said that the first step to increasing your empathy is to adopt a growth mindset- to believe you’re capable of growing in empathy. “People who believe that empathy can grow by trying

harder to empathize when it doesn't come naturally to them, for instance by empathizing with people who are unfamiliar to them or different than they are, compared to people who believe empathy is a stable trait."

It would seem that empathy reflects a willingness to learn and all learning involves questioning your assumptions (don't believe everything you think) and automatic (fast thinking) reactions to what might be regarded as the "big question" issues of Peter Singer as well as those daily concerns or challenges that might be encountered in our families and the workplace. Writing in the Harvard Business Review, James Allworth, Director of Strategy for Medallia Inc., explains that empathy is one of the most valuable things that is taught at the Harvard Business School. In the classroom you are regularly reminded that you are not always right and that you may have to step out of your shoes and into those of someone else. (Empathy: The Most Valuable Thing They Teach at HBS. May 2012).

## CONCLUSION

In their book "Teaching for Experiential Learning," Wurdinger and Carlson (2010) argue that faculty should actively involve their students "in the learning process through discussion, group work, hands-on participation and applying information outside the classroom.(p.2)." Proponents of experiential learning assert that students will be more motivated to learn when they have a personal stake in the subject rather than being assigned to review a topic or read a textbook chapter. University of California Davis. (2011) 5-step experiential learning cycle definitions.

In the Peter Singer proposal, students are considering a problem of global proportions, seemingly far removed from the kind of challenges that they might encounter in an organizational context. There is real resistance on an emotional and intellectual level, as students try to make the case for why the Singer proposal, the Singer "ask", is untenable. What makes this challenge so engaging is that students come to feel at some level, that they have a stake in what they are being asked to do. In the business school curriculum, there are ample case studies that might well serve to stoke the emotions and tap into a person's capacity for acting from a place of empathy. Of course the unanswered question here is how is empathy to be found, its' potential unleashed? The promise of empathy is that it might open our hearts and minds to the possibility of seeing the humanity in others. Empathy has been explained by Sharon Salzberg as "the way we pay attention, which allows us, when we see others suffering, to resonate with their pain. We don't simply feel bad for them. In this way empathy is a moral issue. By paying attention to our experiences with sensitivity, we come to understand how our actions affect others. We know that in harming others with words or actions, and for that matter, inaction, we harm ourselves as well. We experience moral injury This knowledge is an awareness of our fundamental connectedness." And it is that connectedness, that just might move us to see the humanity in others.

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