Empathy: Nature or Nurture?
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"Empathy" has been much in the news lately, largely because of a presidential issue:
living with a leader with no empathy. We rarely have to think about the presence or
lack of empathy because most human beings have empathy to one degree or another.
Empathy is the ability to imagine the feelings or pain of another human being.

Philosophers have long debated the nature of human behavior, wondering how much
behavior is hard wired (Nature) in our genes and how much is shaped by our nurture
(family and community teaching). At the moment, the predominant view is that we are
influenced by both nature and nurture.

Some fascinating studies of babies demonstrate built-in empathy. I saw a documentary
showing five-month-old babies on the laps of their mothers. When one baby cried, the
others looked distressed. Then cartoons were shown of puppets playing peek-a-boo.
Babies laughed. Then puppets were shown sharing a toy, and when one stole the toy
from another, the babies were distressed. Even babies can demonstrate a moral sense.

However, even when hard wired, being reared in a cruel community can destroy the
empathy. A violent culture can turn an otherwise gentle person into a killer, if
killing earns the group?s approval. Our prisons are full of such damaged human
beings, whose sense of empathy has been dulled by poverty, ignorance, and violent
upbringing. With proper treatment, many of these criminals can have their capacity
for empathy strengthened. Prison programs that teach gardening (caring for growing
plants) or care for animals, along with classes to finish school or drama groups
putting on plays, can help rewire the better aspects of being human.

Empathy is taught in our religious texts in an attempt to strengthen what is
hard-wired in us. Two versions of the Golden Rule exist in our Judeo-Christian
bibles. One is: Do unto others that which you would have them do unto you. The other
is: Do not do to others that which you would not want done to you. I think the second
one is more pragmatic. With the first, what happens if a Masochist likes pain and
thinks that others do too?

Indeed, whether nature or nurture, all human beings are not alike. There are a very
few among us who get pleasure in inflicting pain on others. They are called sadists,
and one would have to determine if this sadism was hard wired or taught. There are
also a rare few who have no pain sensation (not a good thing if one is burned or
cut). Such a person cannot know what pain is, and thus can be trained to be a very
good torturer. Fortunately, these are few. The rest of us are on the spectrum of
nature and nurture.

The issue of empathy is not just an intellectual exercise. The damage to all of us
that can be inflicted by a charismatic leader in whom empathy is weak or missing can
be incalculable. Confidence men (conmen) have no empathy for the people they fool,
fleece, or rob. They can evoke the worst aspects of the people they fleece, those who
buy their fake remedies, willing to believe that this persuasive conman is smarter
than the authorities they resent.

Even people capable of empathy for others can be intellectually damaged in their
upbringing. They can be convinced by the more evil among us to hate others, replace
kindness with "might makes right," and believe every conspiracy theory because they
have been taught that others are "out to get you."

A number of men were recently apprehended by the FBI before they could carry out a
planned attack on the governor of Michigan. These young men were prepared to kidnap,
put on "trial," and execute a woman governor because she dared "tell them to wear
masks to protect themselves and others from Coronavirus."

What makes this story even worse is that another person totally lacking empathy,
Donald Trump, cheered them on, calling them "good people." Malignant selfishness is a
grave threat to us all.

670 words

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