This essay maintains that interplays between empathy, goodwill and other-regarding behaviors can make a huge difference in arguing one type of community into existence (one based on inclusivity, peace, respect, and universal human values) as opposed to arguing another kind of community into existence (one based on turmoil, meanness, wretchedness, genocide, and heaps of trouble). The author offers a pedagogy of empathy as a practical approach to improving human relations.

Key terms: empathy, peace, goodwill, pedagogy, human relations

“Tomorrow will be too late.” “I am dying.” “Please help.” These are some of the haunting, moving and anguishing pleas, which have emanated from Aleppo in Syria, a place of genocide. Sadly, today, many innocent women and children cry out for mercy as the Islamic State (IS) and the Syrian army wreak havoc in this war-torn country. Already, the Syrian army has killed more than three hundred and fifty thousand people (“Why is there a War in Syria?” 2018, p. 1). In the United States, in one of his late night comedic commentaries on CBS television, comedian Stephen Colbert declared, “Trump, you have more people marching against you than cancer” (Colbert, 2016). On January 21, 2017, at the Women’s March on Washington, Madonna acknowledged that she had “thought an awful lot about blowing up the White House” (Washington Post, 2011), and for eight
years, the repetitive refrains, “Obama is not a U.S. Citizen,” he is “a practicing Muslim,” rang out across the land (Cohen, 2011).

I am deeply concerned about such compelling, horrific events and un-empathetic discourse, because they can have far-reaching consequences for global society-- for how we live and order our lives.

Although the world is complex and various, and although there are no easy answers for what ails the world, I argue for forms of empathy, which bind human beings to each other. In my research, using historical events and multiple discourses (political treatises, stories, examples, speeches and literature), I grapple with the following overarching questions: What role does empathy play in human interactions? To what extent is empathy a significant tool for humanity? What is at stake interculturally and geopolitically when we fail to refashion the world along the lines of empathy? These questions find expression in my book, *Empathy in the Global World: An Intercultural Perspective* and other works (Calloway-Thomas, 2010). I examine the extent to which empathy argues one type of community into existence (one based on peace, respect, and universal human values) as opposed to arguing another kind of community into existence (one based on turmoil, meanness, wretchedness, genocide and heaps of trouble).
At the center of my book is the idea that studying the nature and zones of empathy is a good way of understanding our troubled, messy world. Along the way, I interrogate under what conditions empathy has succeeded and under what conditions it has failed across a range of topics and situations, including hot contestations over global immigration, the undermining of empathy during the Iraq war, and the role of media in galvanizing empathy toward others. Empathy, I contend, helps human beings to “cooperate effectively, living safely and peacefully in a just and prosperous society, “to borrow from Harari’s Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind.” (2015, p. 108).” Since principles exist in the fertile human imagination of sapiens, and in the myths they invent and tell one another” (Harari, 2017, p. 108), we have the capacity to invent all sorts of extraordinarily humane stories, and think in unprecedented ways.

Since we have this keen human capacity, employing empathetic impulses, we can shape the life of our communities significantly, from the arts (music, drama, song and dance) to public policy. Let us look more closely at the meaning of empathy, why it matters, as well as offer practical ways for global citizens to develop knowledge and information-based skills (empathetic literacy—a pedagogy of empathy) to better respond to and manage intercultural encounters.
We must not only recognize the very centrality of empathy in our lives, but also practice empathy. We need a pedagogy of empathy. We need to create programs of empathetic literacy. But what is empathy? Let us start with the proposition that empathy is a difficult concept to grasp; it is nuanced. That is the great historical and philosophical fact that we must face at the outset. By empathy, I mean the ability, “imaginatively,” to enter into and participate in the world of the cultural other cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally--what we think, what we feel and what we do. The phrase “imagining the feelings of others,” means that we understand the behavior of others better when we are able to enter their world and “see it” through their eyes.

If we accept the proposition that people’s behavior and words can be interpreted as intelligible responses to the natural conditions in which they find themselves and seek to understand, we are better equipped to deal with discourses of empathy in human relations, which also extend into the world of music, the arts, communication and geopolitics.

Of course, attempting to “see through the eyes of others” does not mean that we can duplicate others’ actual feelings, but rather we can suspend judgment and seek to enter their minds and feelings through “imaginative participation,” which is a commitment to “learning what it is like to live by someone else’s light” (Berlin,
1991). In this sense, empathy is also under the rubric of geography because it draws on connections between the near and the distant. Because one cannot always be physically present with the other, empathy requires cognitive and attitudinal movement in space and time. To use the words of an African American group, the Staple Singers, empathy takes us to the proverbial “there, “ allowing us to “see” through the eyes of others, creating both a subject and an object-oriented focus that can shift, depending on whether the lens of cultural empathies are a reflection of one as subject or object.

If practiced pristinely, empathy “takes you there,” into the shared imagination of thousands and millions of people, with a capacity to interact humanely with others. The work of 19th century abolitionists is one of the most exquisite examples of the spatial reach of empathy. Although their audiences were worlds apart from the individuals whom they sought to persuade, Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce and other British abolitionists used their voices to make Britons understand “what lay behind the sugar they ate, the tobacco they smoked, the coffee they drank” (Hochschild, p. 6). I am, of course, referring to the monster slavery, which immobilized so many black people in the 19th century. As Hochschild (2005) notes in Bury the Chains, “In England itself there were no caravans of chained captives (or slaves), no whip-wielding overseers on
horseback stalking the rows of sugar cane” (p. 6). Despite the distance, the faraway was nearby. Empathy worked, and “freed an empire’s slaves.”

At its best, empathy relies on “as if” propositions, from cognitive, affective and behavioral points of view. Rifkin (2009) put it this way. One is empathetic when one has the ability to read and respond to another person “as if” he or she were oneself,” which is the key to how human beings engage the world, create individual identity, develop language, learn to reason, become social, establish cultural narratives, and define reality and existence” (143).

The term empathy was first coined in the mid-19th century by Robert Visher (1994), who aligned it with the psychological theory of art. Visher and others attributed it not to its present usage of feeling for and with others, but, more aesthetically, to art. Their observations reveal that a strong empathy must obtain between performer and listener/reader in order for the latter to understand, feel and experience the aesthetic object, whether a poem, a play, a jazz composition, or Beethoven symphony number 5. This was a way of experiencing human feelings through the act of transference, that is, by transferring aesthetic feelings to oneself in an involuntary way.

In the all-important realm of philosophy in 19th-century Germany, Kant and Hegel saw Einfühlung (empathy) as a vehicle for the “expression of feeling and
emotions” (Dictionary of the History of Ideas, 2003, p. 2). By the mid-1900s, empathy was no longer thought of as merely a feeling for an aesthetic object but rather had evolved into the rubric of empathy, a term coined by American psychologist Tichener (1909) as a translation of the German Einfühlung. Having posited the working definition of empathy as the ability “imaginatively” to enter into and participate in the world of the cultural “Other” cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally, I also recognize the capaciousness of the term, because, as John Holzwarth (2004) points out, “if we can enter imaginatively into the mind of one who suffers, why can we not do the same with one who causes suffering?” (p.2). Holzwarth’s notion is significant for what it reveals about the very nature and uses of empathy: “When we discover in ourselves the emotional capacity to engage the experiences of another, we realize that this capacity can apply almost anywhere” (p.2). This cautionary tale squints in the direction of the “dark side” of empathy. Despite the fact that the concept does not “appear” to have “natural limits,” it is crucial for us to understand some of the core purposes and practices of intercultural empathy today, ever mindful of both the benefits and burdens of the concept and their implications for peace and human affairs.

Finally, my discourse-focused study of empathy and conflict offers several practical uses of empathy that have huge consequences for civil society,
intercultural communication and geopolitics, of which the following two are most crucial.

First, empathy sustains civil society robustly by constituting and promoting equal human dignity. Empathy is an argument. It persuades. I remain faithful to the proposition that virtuous empathy is a necessary condition for highly desirable human outcomes. Underlying my argument about “desirable human outcomes” is an assumption that philosopher Immanuel Kant (1991) advances in his book, *The Metaphysics of Morals*. I agree with Kant that in the moral realm of things, respect for dignity is owed all humans regardless of their standing in the community. “Humanity itself is a dignity; for a man (person) cannot be used merely as a means by any man . . . but must always be used at the same time as an end. We are under obligation to acknowledge in a practical way, the dignity of humanity in every other man” (p. 255).

Jonathan Glover (2000), in his work, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, argues “our inclination to show respect and our disgust at someone’s humiliation is a powerful restraint on barbarism” (p.23). Robbing human beings of their dignity is dramatically revealed in the Amritsar massacre that occurred in India in 1919, when troops under British General Dyer,
ordered his soldiers to fire into a “peaceful” Indian protest. Dyer’s men killed between 500 and 1,000 individuals and wounded a similar number.

After the dust had settled and people observed the carnage, powerful questions emerged: How could this have happened? How could General Dyer have ordered this atrocity? Glover (2000) provides powerful insight into why the atrocity occurred: “Indians’ protective dignity had . . . already been violated” (p. 23). Every day, in countless ways, Indians had to “salute” and “salaam” when they met British authorities; they had to dismount when a British officer approached and even “lie down and rub their noses in the dust and grovel” (Glover, 2000, p.23). Because the soldiers’ everyday behavior had become ordinary, mercy in the form of thinking and feeling simply did not enter into their worldview. This is precisely what empathy tries to prevent. Weren’t these acts supposed to occur? What dignity was owed Indians? The crucial point is that showing respect for someone’s dignity symbolizes that person’s “moral standing” in the community.

The coarsening of discourse in what is increasingly becoming a divided United States of America, has embedded within it a severe warning about what happens when we rob others of their protective dignity. As Hannah
Arendt (1963) so perceptively wrote about the Nazis, “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal” (p. 276). Arendt’s proposition makes me shiver, and shiver, and shiver at the thought of what happens when we do not assume goodwill—when we do not identify with another’s plight, as we seek to live empathetic and peaceful lives.

Second, goodwill lies at the very core of empathy. Goodwill is made possible when we give people the benefit of the perceptual doubt. This rule assumes that most individuals seek psychological comfort and congeniality. This is empathetic literacy in practice. This is empathy pleading for us to do business in an environment of trust and friendship, which also extends to strangers. Like Danielle Allen (2004), I advocate talking to strangers as a way of cultivating global friendships and participating in the shared imaginations of others. Allen (2004) observes, “The ability to adopt equitable self-interest in one’s interactions with strangers is the only mark of a truly democratic citizen, and to employ the techniques of political friendship would be to transform our daily habits and so our political culture. Can we devise an education that,
rather than teaching citizens not to talk to strangers, instead teaches them how to interact with them self-confidently?” (p. 165).

In concluding, allow me to share a personal story about what can happen when goodwill is elevated and sustained, and when one talks to strangers in global society.

In 2006, one of my colleagues and I traveled to Riga in Latvia and Vilnius in Lithuania, to participate in a conference on democracy, peace and civic engagement, and to give lectures respectively. In beautiful Riga, while my colleague and I were shopping for trinkets for family members, we were greeted by two young, enthusiastic Latvian high school women, who, judging from their youth clearly should have been in school and not on the streets of Gorgeous Riga—however engaging and fetching!

As my colleague and I approached the young women, we greeted them, only to be met with the following question: “Why your skin black?” In a nanosecond, I replied, “Our skin is black because we have more melanin in our skin than you have.” Then I said, “But if you stay out in the sun long enough, you might get as dark as we are.” My friend and I finished our obligatory-familial shopping, and upon leaving the product-laden vendor stalls, we encountered the same young women en route back to our hotel. The young
woman who had put a question to us that might have been viewed by some as hostile, mean-spirited and confrontational said, “Hello, we are out in the sun trying to get dark like you.” By employing a pleasing tone and a warm, cooperative verbal message, the young woman who had uttered the interrogative previously, signified that she had asked the question earnestly and with no malice in her heart.

The story also has embedded within it an equally interesting and instructive point about “othering” behavior, however. The young woman’s question was not why her skin was different but rather why was my skin different. The analysis suggests that she saw my colleague and myself as been different from a phenotypical standard! Despite this back story analysis, the point is that marvelous things can happen when we handle as many questions as possible in a “this” (whatever this or that is) search for information manner. Can you recount similar stories that hugely altered your human consciousness? Who sets a powerful example in your neighborhood, community, country or organization? And with impulses that bend us in the direction of empathy, goodwill and peace?

Kant (The Metaphysics of Morals, Chapter 1) reminds us, “The only thing that is good without qualification is the goodwill” (p. 11). What a beautiful idea.
What an alluring way to link the subjective consciousness of one individual to
the intersubjective consciousness of others! I urge all of you assembled here
this morning to help me, to help us, convince millions of strangers to begin the
work of empathy. What, then, are some practical consequences of goodwill?
Goodwill shapes our intercultural conversations positively. Goodwill promotes
citizenly habits of peace. Goodwill inclines us towards building trust, and
begins with a recognition that one is friendly toward the other. Martha
Nussbaum is right, “Being human means accepting promises from other
people and trusting that other people will be good to you “(quoted in Moyers,
1989, p. 448).

At the end of On Anger, after advising his brother Norvatus that “life is too
short to waste it being angry” and after admonishing Norvatus that we should
concentrate our empathetic attention on “virtue alone,” Seneca (1995) writes
one of the most moving comments in the annals of cultural history that should
serve as a guide for universal respect: “At any moment now, we shall spit forth
this life of ours. In the meantime, while we still draw breath, while we still
remain among human beings, let us cultivate humanity.”
Notes

1. I am mindful that empathy has a “dark side,” as I suggest in *Empathy in the Global World* (2010). Paul Bloom (2016) also implies the idea in his work, *Against Empathy*, where he claims “the act of feeling what you think others are feeling—whatever one chooses to call this—is different from being compassionate, from being kind, and most of all, from being good* (p.4). My conception of empathy is multifaceted, however, and takes into consideration cognitive, affective and behavioral components, which together urge humans to be discerning in their treatment of others. In a wider sense, I advocate understanding why people behave as they do, with infinite possibilities for shaping a better world.
References


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