

Empathize with Victory, Not Just Suffering

Empathy has a reputation as a “bleeding heart” emotion. That’s probably right. But I think associating empathy only with suffering only provides half the picture of what empathy can be.

When we have empathy, we can imagine life through the eyes and experiences of other people. That of course means that we can imagine the suffering, pain, fear, and doubt of the people around us.

But it also means we can know the full significance of someone else’s victories.

When we know what it’s like to be another person – with all their faults – we get to better appreciate the wonder of what it’s like for someone to transcend those faults to do something good.

When we empathize with the trauma of someone’s broken family relationships, we can (almost) feel the same kind of joy they might be feeling when they finally build a family of their own. When we empathize with the struggle and loneliness and addiction of an alcoholic person, we can (almost) feel their triumph when they grow beyond it. When we empathize with all of these human struggles, we start to empathize with all of the human strangers around us – and all of the ways in which those human strangers work together to create a beautiful world.

As Jordan Peterson* expresses this beautifully in his book *12 Rules for Life*, we can be genuinely (and pleasantly surprised) everywhere we look:

“People are so tortured by the limitations and constraint of Being that I am amazed they ever act properly or look beyond themselves at all. But enough do so that we have central heat and running water and infinite computational power and electricity and enough for everyone to eat and even the capacity to contemplate the fate of broader society and nature, terrible nature, itself. All that complex machinery that protects us from freezing and starving and dying from lack of water tends unceasingly towards malfunction through entropy, and it is only the constant attention of careful people that keeps it working so unbelievably well. Some people degenerate into the hell of resentment and the hatred of Being, but most refuse to do so, despite

their suffering and disappointments and losses and inadequacies and ugliness, and again that is a miracle for those with the eyes to see it."

It's one thing to transcend your own limitations. It's another to see growth in yourself and everyone else around you. That's a source of great hope.

So you see, empathy is no liability. It does not make you weaker. In fact, it allows you to visualize and appreciate the true strength in all of the strangers all around you. This is empathy which will make you stronger, which will call you to better things, and which will allow you to be a source of strength for others struggling for goodness.

*Peterson is one of the thinkers who has jogged my thinking on this, but you should also check out Leonard Reed's *I, Pencil* if you want to get a sense of the interconnection of things from an economic standpoint.