

Empathy comes from the heart, not the mind

In his book, "Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis," Jeremy Rifkin concludes, in one chapter, "...what is needed is a more transparent public debate around views of freedom, equality and democracy a moratorium on the hyperbolic political rhetoric and incivility...and begin a civil conversation around our differing views on human nature. This would offer us a moment in time to listen to each other, share our feelings, thoughts, concerns and aspirations, with the goal of trying to better understand each others' perspectives, and hopefully find some emotional and cognitive common ground."

While Rifkin's book is a detailed explanation of how we came to be a culture of incivility, and how empathy is a "way out," his conclusion falls short of a real solution. He equates "cognition" with "consciousness" and assumes we can talk ourselves into being empathetic. Love and empathy are matters of the heart, not the mind, and here is where Rifkin, and so many others, who posit intellectual and cognitive solutions for social ills come up short.

Cognition and consciousness are poles apart

Cognition and consciousness are not synonyms but polar ends of a continuum. Here's my take.

We live in challenging times - socially, politically, economically and in our daily lives.

Incivility, disrespect, and out-and-out personal attacks are a consequence of the un-ease. the disease many are experiencing.

So, can I just "think" myself into being empathetic with those who push my buttons? I think not.

Empathy is deeper stuff

Empathy is the ability and willingness to relate - not just cognitively or emotionally, but spiritually to what another is feeling. Being empathetic, we choose to "walk in another's shoes," without egoistically needing to "fix," teach, tell, one-up, advise, sympathize, interrogate, explain or "set them straight." Empathy is a heart-felt choice to engage intimately with others, on a deep level by "be-ing" with another - providing a safe container for another to be vulnerable in our presence, feeling safe, secure, valued and heard. So, why is empathy so hard?

Why being empathetic is challenging

"Underneath the hood" of surface-level anger, distrust and disrespect between folks, there's an element that sources our incivility fear. Fear of what? Fear of losing control. Control of what? Our "identity," our need to feel like a "somebody."

When individuals or groups fear a loss of democracy or status, or feel terrorized about losing their jobs, their homes, their health care, their educational opportunities, their families and sense of self, they fear being relegated to the ranks of "nobodies."

Nobody wants to be a "nobody"

How am I dealing with these marginalized, fearful folks? Am I pushing them away? Do I see them as a threat to my identity, to my feeling like a "somebody?" Do status, ranking and "somebody-ness" depend on my doing, being and having more than them - a "zero-sum" approach to my living life where I feel, "if you get yours, then I won't get mine? Is life a "me. vs. you" proposition? Do I see folks as a means to end? This is where empathy comes into play.

I am you

One tenet of many spiritual traditions is the notion that "I am you" - a metaphysical (far from cognitive) concept that points to the interconnection of all of life. An I/Thou approach to others is not based on the another's packaging, i.e., looks, net worth, degrees, quality and quantity of material possessions, etc. The I/Thou personalness of relationships focuses on a heart-felt "we," rather than "me vs. you." How we are more alike than separate. I/Thou assumes a higher level of "consciousness" how I orient to the planet and the people on the planet.

There are four levels of consciousness:

Unconscious - instinctual, follower

Subconscious - habitual, robotic, drone-like, reactive

Conscious - aware, intelligent, conceptual

Higher Consciousness - intuitive, guiding, truthful, loving, universal

Empathy reflects a state where one interacts with another with a higher consciousness. It's not about "deciding" to do so; it's about an "inner knowing" that I choose to connect. It's heart-felt, love-based. Empathy results from "going inside," asking our hearts if our unconscious, subconscious, or conscious "stories" about others are honest, sincere, and authentic or are really defense mechanisms to protect my "ego" self. Higher consciousness allows us to enter into communication and harmony with others from a place of a "universal mind" where we relate to others as "my brothers and sisters."

From a place of true and real empathy, higher consciousness, the energy of love and warmth fill the space between two people, not the coldness, resistance or resentment of a "me vs. you" ego-perspective. Empathy allows equality between and among individuals, all individuals.

Higher consciousness, not cognition, is the "secret sauce" of cooperation, collaboration, compassion and connection with others. Higher consciousness is a heart-based state that allows me to "feel your pain" - I am you.

Empathy is not thinking

What's needed is a shift in consciousness, not cognition, that puts a microscope on our emotional, psychological and spiritual orientation to the planet and the peoples inhabiting it. This

internal exploration is quiet, slow, continuous and intentional. It's not "thinking about," it's not intellectual. Here we query our heart, not our mind.

Einstein said "The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." My take here is that "*thinking*" is not the problem, but *consciousness*. While folks may be *thinking* differently, they are not moving to a higher level of *consciousness*. And this is the problem - old wine, new wine skins.

The Indian Philosopher Krishnamurti said: "Thoughts are like furniture in a room with the windows and doors closed." Much of the dialogue, books, articles and sharings of well-meaning folks who seek "solutions" to incivility issues are in this room, with the doors and windows closed. Lots of listening, agreeing, disagreeing, and "solutions" but it's the same old furniture, only now with different colors and textures. Why? Discussions are mostly intellectual and cognitive. Only the heart will allow fresh air and lead to true transformation.

Empathy is co-relating

The solutions to our challenges are not about new (cognitive) flavors of democracy, freedom, economics and the like; they are about co-relating and co-creating on a spiritual level. Our mean-spiritedness, anger, mistrust, and intolerance will not be reduced or eliminated by a cognitive understanding, but through the application of the salve of a higher consciousness produced by our hearts and souls. True empathy is not a matter of cognition. it's a matter of heart. The common ground we look to find is not in the real estate of the brain; but in the fertile fields of our hearts.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- Have you engaged in uncivil, demeaning, or disrespectful behavior recently? Did you justify your behavior? How so?
- How do you generally interact with folks who think differently from you?
- Do you live life from an "I need to be right" perspective? If so, why do you think that's so?
- Do you ever view compromise as a weakness? How about being empathetic?
- Do you ever rationalize or justify another's uncivil or disrespectful behavior? If so, how or why?
- Do you ever use "passion" as an excuse to behave inappropriately?
- Have others ever accused you of behaving in an uncivil manner? If so, how did you respond to their accusations?
- How did you, your family, deal with disagreement as you were growing up?
- What do you notice if/when you think others on the planet are your brothers and sisters?
- Can you envision a world where it's possible folks respond to disagreement without being uncivil, bullying, angry, enraged, or otherwise disrespectful?

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