

## The Practice of Empathy

Homily by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones  
Online, Sunday, May 10, 2020  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: The Word We Are Singing (Is Love) by Joyce Poley; Spirit of Life, #123;  
[The Fire of Commitment, #1028.](#)

Story for All Ages: *I Am Human: A Book of Empathy*

Reading: [“Kindness,” a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye.](#)

Special Music: “Thinking Out Loud,” by Ed Sheeran (piano by Irina); [“Lean on Me,” sung by John Legend](#) on YouTube with images of solidarity; note the recent passing of [Bill Withers](#).

### Homily

My homily this morning is called the practice of empathy. First, a definition is helpful. Jamil Zaki is a psychology professor at Stanford University. In a new book, he says empathy is the ability to consider, imagine and appreciate the experience of others. Sometimes empathy is emotional—to feel some of the pain of another’s physical injury or their loss of a loved one. Sometimes it comes from thinking, wondering or learning... what it would be like to be homeless or in prison or a person in a different religion or a different age. Sometimes it comes from listening in humility. We practice empathy when we recognize our common humanity, and when we realize that we don’t all experience the world in the same way.

Empathy is a natural instinct. It’s also a skill. Zaki writes: “At the dawn of our species we [humans] huddled together in groups of a few families. We had neither sharp teeth, nor wings, nor the strength of our ape cousins” to protect us.<sup>i</sup> So we learned how to connect, understand one another, cooperate and provide help. We could not have lasted this long without learning *to get along*.

From Day One as a species, we humans cared for those in our closest circles—our family members and those who lived nearby. Our circle of care widened to include those who spoke our language and looked like us. However, this instinct also made us cautious, hostile and aggressive toward those *outside* our group. The suspicion of outsiders for the sake of group safety was an evolutionary trait. It worked, millions of years ago, when you didn’t venture far from home and rarely encountered other groups. But humans have learned how to cross rivers and oceans and continents. We trade goods and services across borders. On the internet we inhabit the world, with people all over the world. We live in a world that’s interconnected. It’s also heavily armed. This means, in these times, that hostility to others is dangerous *to us all*.

Zaki calls his book *The War for Kindness*. Over the past several decades, he says, empathy and kindness have been worn down, attacked, and in retreat. People are divided, unkind, reactive, hostile, and hateful—in this country and around the world, in personal encounters and especially on social media, radio, and cable TV. Empathy is under siege. Zaki wants us to join his nonviolent campaign. Let’s bring empathy back to our world. The world needs it.

Yet it's good for each of us too. Zaki cites research to show that people with empathy are more likely to succeed in work, relationships, family life, and other aspects of our lives. Empathy can reduce our sense of isolation because it can make us feel more connected with other people. It's good for our health.

Empathy is like a muscle we can exercise—or not. Zaki recalls how he learned the tool of empathy for his own benefit, his own sense of belonging.

He writes: “I was eight years old when my parents began divorcing, but twelve by the time they finished.”<sup>ii</sup> Stubbornly, they didn't try to understand each other's perspectives. They defended their own turf. Their son Jamil didn't want to be caught between them. He didn't want to take sides. But he did want to stay connected to each of them. So he made efforts to understand where each parent was coming from—to see things from their individual perspectives. He calls their very long divorce his empathy gymnasium, where he trained in that skill.

This is a main point of his research—empathy is a skill we can teach and learn. Zaki reports: “We have decades of evidence demonstrating that empathy is shaped by experience. [For example] One-year-old children whose parents express high levels of empathy show greater concern for strangers as two-year-olds, are more able to tune into other people's emotions as four-year-olds, and act more generously as six-year-olds when compared to other children their age.”<sup>iii</sup> (24)

Even as adults, we can keep learning empathy. We can improve it by practice. But it *is* work, he says. In meditation and ritual, for example, Buddhist monks practice compassion for days on end. Compassion is not easy. They practice—to gain it and maintain it.<sup>iv</sup>

We can find many opportunities to do so, many choices for practice. Such as: learning to listen to a difficult classmate, relative, coworker, or fellow congregation member. That will stretch our empathy muscles.

So will the exercise of trying to appreciate what another person finds meaningful in their hobby, work, religious identity, or hometown. Zaki says we need to get outside our familiar circles of people. Getting to know outsiders may not always be easy, he says, but it's great for building empathy.

Zaki says that real, “face-to-face human contact” is the “world's best naturally occurring empathy training.”

The scholar Carolyn Drewek says that we can “change our level of empathy” if we set our minds to it. Her work shows that “simply believing it's possible to change can make it so.”<sup>v</sup>

With such an intention, we can find ways to learn how others experience life. For example, there are great essays to read in magazines and online. I like reading advice columns too. Even though the questions that others have submitted rarely have much to do with my life, I find wisdom in the answers. These days, many TV series and movies capture the world of people I normally would have no interest in getting to know. However, thanks to the art of the storytellers, I am drawn in. My understanding is expanded.

For centuries, the art of literary fiction has taught us empathy. The author's imagination meets ours, as a good story invites us to be curious about the life and experience of other people. Zaki says that every novel or story “helps people understand each other, one reader at a time.”<sup>vi</sup>

On the other hand, reading fiction that resonates with our own situation in the world can affirm our experience. It can make us feel known, feel *empathized with*. And receiving empathy can open us to extending more of it.

Just learning about empathy itself can help us practice it. For example, I was sitting in the back yard while finishing Jamil Zaki's book the other day. A helicopter's rumbling chopping noise broke into my silence. It was loud and it was close. I looked up, and by its red and black paint, I knew it was a helicopter ambulance, heading to the nearby tower of the Medical Center, which includes a Level 1 Trauma Center. Usually, unless I'm trying to sleep, I either enjoy the helicopter's rumble or ignore it.

This time, I started thinking: I wonder who's being transported? Were they hurt in an accident? Were they shot? Is it a child, or somebody's parent, or their spouse? I thought to myself: "Whoever it is, I wish you well. I wish you comfort and ease and healing. To your loved ones, I wish peace and courage." Then I thought about the pilot and the medical personnel up there. No doubt the patient was a stranger to them. Perhaps it was a person of a different religion, color, or country of origin from theirs. Yet I trusted that they would focus the same level of care on that vulnerable human being as on any other patient in their care. Looking up, I prayed: "Thank you for your service. May you be safe." Then I thought about the hospital workers who were preparing to receive this patient. "Thank you for your talent and your care. May you all be well."

I meant it. I was surprised at my strong feelings when I did this. However, some of the stories in Zaki's book do take place in hospitals, and they were fresh in my mind at the time. So reading Zaki's book was for me an *empathy nudge*. It invited me to imagine another's experience. An empathy nudge. I'm grateful for it.

What is empathy? It's the ability to consider, imagine and appreciate the experience of others. For the rest of the day, and in the days to come, you are invited to consider empathy. Notice when you receive it from others, and be thankful. Notice when you get an empathy nudge.

Choose opportunities to practice empathy and show kindness. Appreciate that it's not always easy. But it might be good for you, and good for us all. Let's all be on the lookout for empathy and celebrate it where we find it. Let's remember it, defend it, and add more of it into the world. So may it be.

### Prayer

(During Joys and Sorrows: My grief and anger at the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, a black man in Brunswick, Georgia, who was gunned down while running outside. A former police officer and son, a pair of white nationalists, were not arrested until the video was made public of the killing.)

Please join me for this time of prayer in word and silence.

O Spirit of life, hold us in tenderness. In these times of actual physical separation, hold us together in the spirit of love. We give thanks for this community, and for everyone connected right now. May everyone remember that we are not alone. We are connected.

Let us now practice a version of the loving kindness meditation. Relax...

Start with kindness for ourselves, then others in our lives, with ever widening circles of concern

For me... may I be well, may I be safe, may I know peace, may I have courage

For those in our circles of care—our loved ones, our friends, those in our congregation... may you be well, may you be safe, may you know peace, may you have courage.

For all who are sick; for all who are worried, lonely, hurting, or grieving... May you be well, may you be safe, may you know peace, may you have courage

For those longing for justice and solidarity in a culture of racial domination and violence...may you be well, may you be safe may you know peace, may you have courage

For all who are helping—food workers, transportation workers, health professionals and care providers...may you be well, may you be safe, may you know peace, may you have courage

For all those whom we do not know in our neighborhoods and city, this region, and this nation... may they be well, may they be safe, may they know peace, may they have courage.

For those around the world, everyone who is a member of the human family, as full of dignity and worth as we are--may they be well, may they be safe, may they know peace, may they have courage.

May we be held in loving kindness, and may it center our spirits and ground our living, one day at a time, one moment at a time. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Jamil Zaki, *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World* (New York, 2019: Crown), 5.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.