

ST.GALLEN SYMPOSIUM

Global Essay Competition 2024

Title: Tapping to Extract the Infinite Currency of Kindness

Essay:

Empathy, the sharing of feelings with another human and caring about them has been a virtue in our society. It has been shaping our moral values, fostering mutual understanding and a collective sense of responsibility among people for ages.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe eloquently encapsulated this when he said, "Kindness is the golden chain by which society is bound together."

However, as we traverse the 21st century, this virtue appears to be slowly becoming scarce. In today's world, where technological advancements connect us globally, paradoxically, a genuine human connection seems to be fading and the relentless pursuit of material success waning the essence of shared humanity.

This scarcity of genuine human connection and empathy is making me feel insecure, not just in terms of my place in a divided world but also about those thousands of young people who feel isolated and lost.

This essay aims to bring out the intricacies of emotional scarcity, highlighting its significance in our societal fabric, and proposes an approach to address this scarcity, emphasizing the need to strive for more emotional intelligence and empathy.

Empathy in short supply?

Sedentary lifestyles are spreading across the world (Park, Jung Ha et al,2020) promoting a lack of physical activity, long hours of mobile phone usage, and video games. Social media occupies a huge chunk of mobile phone usage. Now, social media platforms, in themselves are not inherently bad, they promise enhanced connectivity, information sharing, and creative expression of thoughts. However, they have become a breeding ground for superficial interactions, addictive behaviour, and a skewed sense of connection. Frequent social media users are more inclined to suffer from anxiety and depression (Labrague,2014).

Japan faces a form of severe social withdrawal, known as "hikikomori" in which individuals overwhelmed by societal expectations and pressures, completely withdraw from social interactions.

The rise in Consumerism, fuelled by the allure of a modern lifestyle defined by material possessions, is shaping our aspirations and daily choices. In this pursuit of having more, the capacity to pause, listen, and truly understand the emotions of others is diminishing.

There is an overwhelming scientific consensus regarding the addressing of climate change issues urgently. However, there remains a big divide between awareness and effective action. The unwillingness of certain countries to commit to significant reductions in their carbon emissions reductions shows apathy in addressing one of the most important concerns of the contemporary world.

There is a decrease in community involvement locally. Strong social ties and a sense of shared duty that formerly defined traditional community are eroding. People are becoming more and more preoccupied with their personal lives, which is causing them to participate less in the community and be less empathetic towards the difficulties faced by others.

What is worrying is the fact that this empathy deficit is palpable across the various spheres of society, be it educational, corporate, or governmental. The concept of Empathy scarcity is thus not an abstract

notion, it is a reality. The consequences of its unavailability/ low supply in society are far-reaching: a diminished sense of well-being, mistrust, loss of social cohesion, and heightened discord within the members.

Future problem

While envisioning a future, I see a world full of people devoid of empathy and meaningful human connections. I foresee a world marked by increased isolation, strained relationships, and a pervasive sense of disconnection. The ability to comprehend and resonate with others' feelings would fall, resulting in fewer genuine connections. Conversations would just become transactional. Friendships and familial ties would take a hit. People will become isolated, contributing to higher stress levels, anxiety, and mental health challenges. The workplace would become more competitive wherein the absence of empathetic leadership would hinder creativity, productivity, and job satisfaction.

The major impact would be on the larger societal structures. Social issues would be approached with indifference, as the collective will to address challenges with compassion and empathy fades, hindering the resolve to address issues such as poverty, inequality, and environmental sustainability.

From a personal standpoint, the scarcity of empathy in this future scenario is particularly disheartening. The richness in our lives lies in the depth of our connections, the shared joys, and the collective resilience in the face of challenges. Without empathy, we all are just some toys ticking away their allotted time.

Strive for More empathy and emotional intelligence?

It is imperative to strive for more empathy and emotional intelligence since it is like a renewable resource, you need to learn and perfect the art and science of creating empathy among the masses and propagating it over the years and generations.

It is important to recognize that empathy and emotional intelligence are the building blocks of meaningful connections (Nasiri Zarch, Zohre et al,2014), which in turn contribute to a sense of belongingness and mutual support. The societal values and humanitarian considerations reflect the urgent need and as society grapples with the pervasive effects of low levels of empathy among its members, it becomes necessary to strive for more emotional intelligence.

Google's Project Aristotle is a remarkable study in this regard, it concluded that the most successful teams didn't necessarily include the most talented and knowledgeable people but rather those with higher levels of emotional intelligence.

Another notable case study on the same subject is the implementation of RULER training in schools across the United States. It is an evidence-based approach to social and emotional learning (SEL) developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence.⁵ Under this, students are taught to Recognize, Understand, Label, Express, and Regulate their emotions. It has succeeded in not only curbing the behavioural issues among the kids but also helped improve their academic performance, emphasizing the positive impact and the need to strive for more emotional intelligence among the people.

Addressing Emotional Scarcity: A Multifaceted Approach

To tackle the scarcity of empathy among individuals, we need a holistic approach, transcending individual efforts and the underlying social structures. The approach would encompass educational, cultural, and interpersonal aspects. The 6 pillars will help to foster a compassionate society, where empathy is seen as a sacred resource, which not only requires support but also propagation:

1. Educational Reforms

Education shapes our values and perspectives. Introducing empathy education in schools, literature that highlights diverse experiences, creating a safe space for open discussions on emotions, and integrating empathy-building activities, can help nurture generations with a deeper understanding of others' feelings at a grassroots level. Social and Emotional Training (SET) has been incorporated into Sweden's schools, demonstrating the positive outcomes of embedding emotional intelligence as a core subject.

2. Promoting diverse opinions in media

Media has a powerful influence on society in shaping societal attitudes. Stereotypes can be challenged by promoting diverse narratives and help in cultivating empathy on a global level. For this media needs to be free and independent, and measures need to be taken to free the state-controlled media.

3. Experiential learning

Immersive experiences such as cultural exchanges, global internships, and volunteering programs provide firsthand experience by exposing individuals to diverse cultures and communities. Such perspectives help in cultivating empathy since they challenge preconceived notions and inherent stereotypes.

4. Building community engagement

One of the most important channels to cultivate a sense of togetherness and empathy is building strong, supportive communities. The reason behind the loss of empathy can be attributed to the falling shared activities and discussions on local issues. When people come together for problem-solving, it helps create a sense of belonging and understanding. Such engagements encourage active listening, collaboration, and empathy with the experiences of others. The Blue Zones project has been implemented in 75 communities, impacting over 5 million lives. The project has succeeded in transforming these communities. It has not only prioritized social connections but also fostered a strong sense of community and support within the community.

5. Cultural Shift: Redefining Success

There is a need to augment the way we measure happiness and prosperity. Even the indicators like Human Development Index (HDI) fall short of measuring "real" success on a societal level. Bhutan is a model nation that has showcased how a cultural shift from Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to Gross National Happiness (GNH) can prioritize happiness and societal well-being, striving for more natural prosperity. It's interesting to know that Bhutan's GNH Index value increased even in the face of economic downturns like the Global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, which shows its commitment to fostering well-being and happiness.

6. Intergenerational Connections

We have lost touch with our grandparents and our forefathers. The current pace of life has created a rift between the two generations. By bridging generational gaps through intergenerational programs, we can promote empathy. When people of different age groups meet and talk, it creates a rich tapestry of experience. Each generation would learn something from the other, and in the meantime, empathy will develop and evolve.

Conclusion

In this fast-paced environment, the capacity to pause, listen, and truly understand the emotions of others often takes a backseat to individual ambitions. Recognizing that empathy as a catalyst can harmonize our society, we delved into various initiatives to foster an open dialogue in a safe space.

Education is a transformative force, which instills empathy as a fundamental value. Media as a platform amplifies diverse narratives, challenging stereotypes. Communities emerge as hubs where shared activities shape a culture of mutual support and experiential learning opens new horizons. In a VUCA (Volatile Uncertain Complex Ambiguous) world, it becomes important to redefine the success parameters, by synthesizing the learnings of the older generation, we can weave a new world order.

By embracing these strategies, we can lay the foundation for a world where empathy is not scarce but an abundant resource, shaping a future where human connections are deepened, divisions are bridged, and the collective pursuit of empathy becomes a powerful force for positive change.

As we continue to navigate the complexities of the modern world, we can recount the infinite potential of the currency of kindness – a resource that, when tapped into has the power to redefine wealth and create a more compassionate and thriving society.

Reference List / Bibliography / Sources:

1. Park, Jung Ha et al. "Sedentary Lifestyle: Overview of Updated Evidence of Potential Health Risks." Korean journal of family medicine vol. 41,6 (2020): 365-373. doi:10.4082/kjfm.20.0165
2. Labrague, L. J. (2014). Facebook use and adolescents' emotional states of depression, anxiety, and stress. Health Sci. J. 8, 80–89.
3. Teo, Alan R, and Albert C Gaw. "Hikikomori, a Japanese culture-bound syndrome of social withdrawal?: A proposal for DSM-5." The Journal of nervous and mental disease vol. 198,6 (2010): 444-9. doi:10.1097/NMD.0b013e3181e086b1
4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html>
5. <https://www.rulerapproach.org/>
6. Nasiri Zarch, Zohre et al. "The Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Marital Satisfaction: 10-Year Outcome of Partners from Three Different Economic Levels." Iranian journal of psychiatry vol. 9,4 (2014): 188-96.
7. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-us-has-an-empathy-deficit/>
8. M. Kate Berardi, Annie M. White, Dana Winters, Kaila Thorn, Mark Brennan & Pat Dolan (2020) Rebuilding communities with empathy, Local Development & Society, 1:1, 57-67, DOI: 10.1080/26883597.2020.1794761
9. <https://info.bluezonesproject.com/home>
10. <https://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/news/bhutan-gross-national-happiness-index-shows-increase-2015-despite-pandemic>

Word Count (essay text only): (1671/2100)