Empathy

Why It Matters, and How to Get It

ROMAN KRZNARIC

A Perigee Book 2014

Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Contents

The Radical Power of Empathy

THE REVOLUTION OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Empathy has a reputation as a fuzzy, feel-good emotion. Many people equate it with everyday kindness and emotional sensitivity and being tender and caring toward others. This book offers a very different view. Empathy is, in fact, an ideal that has the power both to transform our own lives and to bring about fundamental social change. Empathy can create a revolution. Not one of those old-fashioned revolutions based on new laws, institutions, or governments but something much more radical: a revolution of human relationships.

Over the past decade there has been a surge of empathic thinking and action around the globe driven by political activists and advice columnists, business gurus and religious leaders. Protesters in the Occupy movement in Britain and the United States erected Empathy Tents and ran workshops on empathic activism. A radio

soap opera in Rwanda, listened to by 90 percent of the population every week, inserts empathic messaging into its storyline about Hutus and Tutsis living in neighboring villages, in an effort to prevent a revival of ethnic violence. Hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren have been taught empathy skills through Roots of Empathy, a Canadian education program that has spread to Britain, New Zealand, and other countries, that brings babies into the classroom and turns them into teachers. A German social entrepreneur has established a worldwide network of museums where blind guides have taken more than seven million visitors around exhibits that are in total darkness, to give them the experience of being visually impaired. All these initiatives are part of a historic wave of empathy that is challenging our highly individualistic, self-obsessed cultures, in which most of us have become far too absorbed in our own lives to give much thought to anyone else.

But what exactly is empathy? And what does it look like in practice?

First, let's get the meaning clear: *empathy is the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions.*[1] So empathy is distinct from expressions of *sympathy*—such as pity or feeling sorry for somebody—because these do not involve trying to understand the other person's emotions or point of view. Nor is empathy the same as the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," since this assumes your own interests coincide with theirs. George Bernard Shaw remarked on this in characteristic style when he quipped, "Do *not* do unto others as you would have them do unto you—they might have different tastes." Empathy is about discovering those different tastes.

If you want to grasp just what it means to make the imaginative leap of empathy, then let me introduce you to Patricia Moore, a pioneering figure for today's empathic activists. In 1979, Moore was

working as a product designer at the top New York firm Raymond Loewy, which was responsible for creating the curvy Coca-Cola bottle and the iconic Shell logo. Age twenty-six and fresh out of college, she was the only woman designer among 350 men at their Midtown Manhattan office. During a planning meeting to brainstorm a new refrigerator model, she asked a simple question: "Couldn't we design the door so that someone with arthritis would find it easy to open?" One of her senior colleagues turned to her and replied with disdain, "Pattie, we don't design for those people." She was incensed. What did he mean, "those people"? Riled by his response, she decided to conduct what turned out to be one of the most radical empathy experiments of the twentieth century. She would discover what it was like to be an eighty-five-year-old woman.

"I didn't just want to be an actress pretending to be an elderly person," she told me, "I wanted a true immersion character, an empathic character, where I could really walk in someone else's shoes." So with the help of a professional makeup artist, she transformed herself. She put layers of latex on her face so she looked old and wrinkly, wore clouded glasses that blurred her vision, plugged her ears so she couldn't hear well, clipped on a brace and wrapped bandages around her torso so she was hunched over, taped splints to her arms and legs so she was unable to bend her limbs, and finished off her disguise with uneven shoes so she was forced to hobble with a stick.

Now she was ready.

Between 1979 and 1982 Moore visited more than a hundred North American cities in her persona, attempting to negotiate the world around her and find out the everyday obstacles that elderly people faced and how they were treated. She tried going up and down steep subway stairs, riding on crowded busses, pushing through heavy department store doors, crossing busy streets before

the lights changed, using can openers and, of course, opening refrigerators.

The result of her immersion? Moore took international product design in a completely new direction. Based on her experiences and insights, she was able to design a series of innovative products that were suitable for use by elderly people, including those with arthritic hands. Among her inventions was a line of potato peelers and other kitchen utensils with thick rubber handles, which can now be found in almost every home. She is credited as the creator of "inclusive" or "universal" design, where products are designed for people of all abilities, whether aged five or eighty-five. Moore went on to become an expert in the field of gerontology and an influential campaigner for the rights of senior citizens: she was instrumental in getting the Americans with Disabilities Act onto the statute books. Throughout her career, she has been driven more by the desire to improve people's lives than by the lures of financial success. Now in her sixties, she is currently designing rehabilitation centers where U.S. soldiers who have returned from Afghanistan and Iraq with missing limbs or brain injuries can go to relearn how to live independently, practicing everything from buying groceries to using a cash machine.

Moore has become famous for her "empathic model," which has enlightened a whole generation of designers who now recognize the importance of looking through the eyes of the people who will use the products they create. "Universal design is driven by empathy," she explains, "an understanding that one size doesn't fit all—and that's what my whole career has been about."[5]

Her experiment in time travel across the generations is a touchstone for the empathists of the future. Making the effort to look through other people's eyes can be personally challenging—and sometimes deeply exhilarating—but it also has extraordinary potential as a force for social change.

THE SIX HABITS OF HIGHLY EMPATHIC PEOPLE

Patricia Moore discovered the power of empathy in the 1970s. Then why are so many people suddenly talking about it now? The idea of empathy is not new. It first rose to prominence in the eighteenth century, when the Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith wrote that our moral sensitivity derives from our mental capacity for "changing places in fancy with the sufferer." But the recent explosion of interest is largely due to groundbreaking scientific discoveries about human nature.

For the past three hundred years, influential thinkers from Thomas Hobbes to Sigmund Freud have been telling us that we are essentially self-interested, self-preserving creatures who pursue our own individualistic ends. Over time, this dark depiction of human beings has become the prevailing view in Western culture. In the last decade, however, it has been nudged firmly to one side by evidence that we are also *Homo empathicus*—wired for empathy.[3] The recent discovery of our empathic selves is one of the most remarkable stories of modern science. I will be telling this story in the next chapter, but in short, there have been pathbreaking advances on three fronts. Neuroscientists have identified a ten-section "empathy circuit" in our brains which, if damaged, can curtail our ability to understand what other people are feeling. Evolutionary biologists have shown that we are social animals who have naturally evolved to be empathic and cooperative, just like our primate cousins. And child psychologists have revealed that even three-year-olds are able to step outside themselves and see other people's perspectives. It is now evident that we have an empathic side to our natures that is just as strong as our selfish inner drives.

This radical shift in our conception of who and what we are has

started to filter into public life, prompting a wave of fresh thinking about how to educate our children, how to organize our institutions, and what we really need for personal well-being. "Looking after number one" is becoming an outdated aspiration as we begin to realize that empathy is at the core of being human. We are in the midst of a great transition from the Cartesian age of "I think, therefore I am," to an empathic era of "You are, therefore I am."[3]

Yet for all the unprecedented media coverage and public discussion of empathy, there remains a vital question that few people are talking about—and it is the one at the center of this book: *How can we expand our empathic potential?* We may well be wired for empathy, but we still need to think about how we are going to bring our circuits to life.

I have spent the last dozen years searching for an answer to this question, exploring the research on empathy in fields from experimental psychology to social history, from anthropology to literary studies, from politics to brain science. Along the way I have delved into the lives of pioneering empathists, many of whom you will meet in these pages, including an Argentinian revolutionary, a best-selling American novelist, and Europe's most famous undercover journalist. I have also done fieldwork, speaking to people from every walk of life about their experiences of empathy, or its absence. Whether they've been trauma nurses or investment bankers, police officers or professional working mothers, people living on the streets of inner-city London or wealthy Guatemalan plantation owners, almost everyone has a story to tell about stepping into the shoes of others.

What I have discovered is that highly empathic people have something in common. They make an effort to cultivate six habits—a set of attitudes and daily practices that spark the empathic circuitry in their brains, enabling them to understand how other people see the world. The challenge we face, if we hope to fully realize the *Homo*

empathicus that lies within each of us, is to develop these six habits in ourselves as best we can.

The Six Habits of Highly Empathic People

Habit 1: Switch On Your Empathic Brain
Shifting our mental frameworks to recognize that empathy is at the core of human nature and that it can be expanded throughout our lives.

Habit 2: Make the Imaginative Leap
Making a conscious effort to step into other people's shoes—including those of our "enemies"—to acknowledge their humanity, individuality, and perspectives.

Habit 3: Seek Experiential Adventures
Exploring lives and cultures that contrast with our own through direct immersion, empathic journeying, and social cooperation.

Habit 4: Practice the Craft of Conversation
Fostering curiosity about strangers and radical listening and taking off our emotional masks.

Habit 5: Travel in Your Armchair
Transporting ourselves into other people's minds with the help of art, literature, film, and online social networks.

Habit 6: Inspire a Revolution
Generating empathy on a mass scale to create social change and extending our empathy skills to embrace the natural world.

There are habits to suit every temperament and personality, whether you are an extrovert or an introvert, a risk-taking adventurer or a connoisseur of intimacy and subtle emotions. Making them part of your everyday life will change how you think, how you feel, and what you do. You'll start to be fascinated by entering people's mind-sets and trying to see where they are coming from—their underlying motives, aspirations, and beliefs. Your understanding of what makes people tick will expand beyond measure and, like many highly empathic people, you may begin to find others more interesting than yourself.

There is nothing utopian about living by these six habits: the capacity to empathize is one of the great hidden talents possessed by almost every human being.

Nearly all of us have it—even if we don't always put it to use. Only a tiny proportion of people display what the psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen calls "zero degrees of empathy." Among them are psychopaths, who have a cognitive ability to enter your mind but make no emotional bond with you (think Hannibal Lecter), and, arguably, some people with autism spectrum disorders such as Asperger syndrome, who have a harder time understanding the emotions and experiences of others. Together they account for no more than around 2 percent of the general population. The other 98 percent of humanity is born to empathize and wired for social connection.[5]

The capacity to empathize is one of the great hidden talents possessed by almost every human being.

We also empathize much more frequently than we would ever imagine. Most of us exercise our empathic brains every day, although we are often not conscious of doing so. When you notice a new work colleague is nervous before giving a presentation, you might try to imagine the anxiety and uncertainty she is feeling, and

give her the reassurance she needs. You see someone begging under a bridge, and rather than just pitying him (remember, that's sympathy), you may think about what it feels like to sleep out on a cold winter night or to have people walk straight past you without even bothering to look you in the eye. But empathy is not just about an awareness of the pain and suffering around us. Even when choosing a birthday present for your favorite aunt, you think about the kind of gift that would really delight her—someone with her particular tastes, and of her age and background—not what you might personally wish for as a present.

I am convinced that we cannot explain vast realms of social life without acknowledging the reality and importance of everyday empathy. Just try to imagine a world where it did not exist. It is almost impossible to do so. Mothers would ignore the hunger cries of newborn babies. Charities fighting child poverty would fold due to lack of donations. Few people would make the effort to help a person in a wheelchair trying to open a shop door. Your friends would yawn with boredom as you told them about your marriage breaking up.

This heartless world of indifference is not the one we live in. Open your eyes to it, and you will realize that empathy is all around us; it's the stuff we swim in. Yet if that is the case, what's the problem? Why should we care about cultivating the six habits of highly empathic people? Because at this moment in history we are suffering from an acute empathy deficit, both as a society and in our individual lives.

TACKLING THE EMPATHY DEFICIT

In the lead-up to the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Barack Obama made empathy one of his major campaign themes:

There's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit—our ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes, to see the world through those who are different from us—the child who's hungry, the laid-off steelworker, the immigrant cleaning your dorm room. . . . We live in a culture that discourages empathy, a culture that too often tells us that our principal goal in life is to be rich, thin, young, famous, safe and entertained.[6]

While the Obama administration may have had a mixed record on tackling the empathy deficit (the Guantanamo Bay detention camp remained open throughout his first term in office despite his pledge to close it), he was certainly right to highlight it as a major social problem. A recent study at the University of Michigan revealed a dramatic decline in empathy levels among young Americans between 1980 and today, with the steepest drop being in the last ten years. The shift, say researchers, is in part due to more people living alone and spending less time engaged in social and community activities that nurture empathic sensitivity. Psychologists have also noticed an "epidemic of narcissism": one in ten Americans exhibit narcissistic personality traits that limit their interest in the lives of others. Many analysts believe that European countries are experiencing similar reductions in empathy and increases in narcissism as urbanization continues to fragment communities, civic engagement decreases, and free market ideologies deepen individualism.[7]

These trends are especially worrying given that the rise of social networks and online culture is believed to be making us more connected and globally aware than at any time in history. Facebook may have attracted over a billion users, but it has not served to reverse the empathic decline and might even be contributing to it. Social networks are good at spreading information, but—at least to date—less adept at spreading empathy.

Evidence of the empathy deficit in society is everywhere we turn. In the month I write these words, over five thousand civilians have been killed in Syria's civil war. I open the newspaper and read about the scandal of Catholic priests in Ireland who have been accused of molesting young children. New figures reveal that two-thirds of high-income countries have a wider gap between rich and poor than they did in 1980, while a study at the University of California shows that the richer you are, the less empathic you are likely to be—it seems there is nothing like wealth to make you insensitive to human deprivation and suffering.[8] And don't forget the international negotiations to reduce carbon emissions that continue to stall, evidence of our inability to put ourselves in the shoes of future generations who will have to face the consequences of an ecological crisis we are collectively responsible for creating.

Political and ethnic violence, religious intolerance, poverty and hunger, human rights abuses, global warming—there is an urgent need to harness the power of empathy to tackle these crises and bridge social divides. This requires thinking about empathy not just as a relationship between individuals, which is how it is typically described in psychology textbooks, but as a collective force that can shift the contours of the social and political landscape.

I am hopeful about the possibilities. Looking back through history, there is no doubt we can see moments of mass empathic collapse, from the slaughter of the Crusades to the horrors of the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide. But there have also been waves of collective empathic flowering, such as the humanitarian revolution in eighteenth-century Europe, which saw the rise of the movement to abolish slavery, the decline of torture in the judicial system, improved prison conditions, and growing concern for the rights of children and workers. This moral revolution, writes Steven Pinker, was rooted in "the rise of empathy and the regard

for human life."[9] We should be turning to examples like this for inspiration—and to others whom I will describe in this book—and put empathy to work to tackle the great issues of our time.

Alongside the empathy deficit that plagues contemporary society is a less obvious one that exists on the level of our individual lives. This more personal deficit takes the form of a failure to grasp the enormous opportunity that empathy offers to improve the quality of our everyday existence. We need to recognize that empathy doesn't just make you good—it's good for you too. Many well-being experts are beginning to recognize this fundamental truth of the art of living. Among them is the economist Richard Layard, who advocates "deliberate cultivation of the primitive instinct of empathy" because "if you care more about other people relative to yourself, you are more likely to be happy." Similarly, personal development thinker Stephen Covey argues that empathic communication is one of the keys to improving interpersonal relations.[10] So what can empathy really do for us?

For a start, it has the power to heal broken relationships. So many relationships fall apart because at least one person feels that their needs and feelings are not being listened to and understood. A healthy dose of empathy, say couples counselors, is one of the best cures available. Empathy can also deepen our friendships and help create new ones—especially useful in a world where one in four people suffer from loneliness. Creative thinking improves with an injection of empathy too because it enables you to see problems and perspectives that would otherwise remain hidden. And, as the stories in this book reveal, there is nothing like looking through someone else's eyes to help question your own assumptions and prejudices and spark new ways of thinking about your priorities in life.[11]

These are the kinds of benefits that are prompting a growing number of people to adopt empathy as a philosophy of life in its own right, turning their personal empathy deficits into a healthy

surplus. They can take their lead from designer Patricia Moore, who explained to me exactly why empathy matters so much to her:

> *Empathy is a constant awareness of the fact that your concerns are not everyone's concerns and that your needs are not everyone's needs, and that some compromise has to be achieved moment by moment. I don't think empathy is charity, I don't think empathy is self-sacrifice, I don't think empathy is prescriptive. I think empathy is an ever-evolving way of living as fully as possible, because it's pushing your envelope and pushing you into new experiences that you might not expect or appreciate until you're given the opportunity.*[13]

Empathy might well be a route to the good life, but we should also appreciate how it can make us good, shaping our ethical visions. Philosophers and social thinkers have long considered empathy to be one of the most effective means we have of expanding the boundaries of our moral universes. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, novelist Ian McEwan wrote: "Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality."[13] But perhaps the most famous and influential statement on this theme was made by Mahatma Gandhi, shortly before his assassination in 1948. It is known as "Gandhi's Talisman":

> *Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.*[14]

Gandhi's empathic thought experiment offers a compelling—if challenging—moral guide to live by. Just imagine if this talisman sat framed on the desk of every political leader, banking titan, and media baron. Or even on our own.

Anthropologists have also found that empathic thinking underpins moral codes in cultures around the world. A Cheyenne Native American proverb advises, "Do not judge your neighbor until you walk two moons in his moccasins." Most Pacific Island languages possess expressions that denote a sense of caring based on understanding other people's emotions and looking at the world from their perspective, such as the term *te nanoanga*, used by the Banaban people of Fiji.[11] In southern Africa, the humanist philosophy of Ubuntu is known for its empathic elements. "A person with Ubuntu," writes Desmond Tutu, "is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished. . . . Ubuntu speaks about our interconnectedness."

Ultimately, the best reason to develop the habit of empathizing is that empathy can create the human bonds that make life worth living. Once we truly recognize that we are *Homo empathicus*, social animals who thrive on connection rather than isolation, it makes little sense to suppress the empathic side of ourselves. Our well-being depends on us stepping out of our own egos and into the lives of others, both people close to us and distant strangers. The pleasures of doing so are real and profound. Without empathic bonds we are lesser beings, only part of who we could be. Or as the poet John Donne put it in the seventeenth century:

> *No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because*

I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.

FROM INTROSPECTION TO "OUTROSPECTION"

Where have we got to so far? Put simply, empathy matters. We need to move beyond a scientific understanding of empathy, and recognize it as a powerful tool that can both create radical social change and give greater depth and meaning to our lives. This should be cause enough to place it right at the top of our to-do lists. But before making a start by exploring the six habits of empathic people, there is an even bigger picture we need to see, an overarching reason why empathy deserves to be at the center of how we approach the art of living: it is an antidote to the self-absorbed individualism that we have inherited from the last century.

I think of the twentieth century as the Age of Introspection. It was the era in which the self-help industry and therapy culture promoted the idea that the best way to understand who you are and how to live was to look inside yourself and focus on your own feelings, experiences, and desires. This individualistic philosophy, which has come to dominate Western culture, has failed to deliver the good life to most people. So the twenty-first century needs to be different. Instead of introspection, we should create a new Age of Outrospection, where we find a better balance between looking inward and looking outward. By *outrospection* I mean the idea of discovering who you are and how to live by stepping outside yourself and exploring the lives and perspectives of other people.[16] And the essential art form for the Age of Outrospection is empathy. I am not implying that we should completely reject introspection.

Clearly we can learn a lot about ourselves through self-reflection, and a mindful examination of our own thoughts and actions may well help liberate us from prejudices and selfish traits that hold back our empathy. The problem is that the pendulum has swung too far toward introspection. Let me explain.

One of the consequences of the Freudian revolution was to popularize the inward gaze, especially the idea of solving personal problems by delving into the inner, unconscious world of our childhood, dreams, and forgotten memories. This belief in the importance of searching inside ourselves became a core principle of the various forms of psychoanalysis and therapy that exploded in the years after Freud's death in 1939.

The rapid rise of therapy culture was striking, particularly in the United States. In 1940 around 4 percent of the U.S. population had tried psychotherapy, but by the late 1950s this figure had grown to 14 percent. Between 1950 and 1975 the number of practicing psychotherapists multiplied eightfold. Even more remarkable was the growing proportion of people who were going to see an analyst not to deal with mental illnesses like depression but rather to find meaning and human connection in their lives. "Americans were increasingly replacing traditional problem-solvers—friends and confidantes—with short-term psychotherapists," according to medical scholar Ronald W. Dworkin, so that by the 1970s "the therapist in American life had become a substitute friend for unhappy people."[7]

An astute observer of this phenomenon was the Australian philosopher Peter Singer. Upon moving to New York in the 1970s, he was struck by how many of his academic colleagues were in regular therapy. They often saw their therapist on a daily basis, and some were spending up to a quarter of their annual salaries to enjoy the privilege. Singer found it strange that these people did not seem any more or less disturbed than his friends and workmates in Mel-

bourne or Oxford. So he asked them why they were doing it. "They said that they felt repressed," remembered Singer, "or had unresolved psychological tensions, or found life meaningless."

The problem, wrote Singer, is that we are unlikely to find meaning and purpose by looking inward:

> *People spend years in psychoanalysis, often quite fruitlessly, because psychoanalysts are schooled in Freudian dogma that teaches them to locate problems within the patient's own unconscious states, and to try to resolve these problems by introspection. Thus patients are directed to look inwards when they should really be looking outwards. . . . Obsession with the self has been the characteristic psychological error of the generations of the seventies and eighties. I do not deny that problems of the self are vitally important; the error consists in seeking answers to those problems by focusing on the self.*

Singer thought his colleagues would be far better off if they dedicated themselves to a cause that was greater than themselves. "If these able, affluent New Yorkers had only got off their analysts' couches, stopped thinking about their own problems and gone out to do something about the real problems faced by less fortunate people in Bangladesh or Ethiopia—or even in Manhattan," he wrote, "they would have forgotten their own problems and maybe made the world a better place as well."[18]

Singer went too far in his rejection of introspection. Most of us recognize that looking inward and into our pasts can help us discover an enormous amount about who we are. Equally, good therapy has the power to transform our lives (as it has my own). Yet Singer was one of the first thinkers to notice that we may not have the balance right, and that we might need more of an outward turn—what I call "outrospection"—to discover the good life.

He was not alone in his skeptical attitude toward introspection.

Joining him was the cultural critic Tom Wolfe, who described the 1970s as the "Me Decade," when obsession with the self reached new historical heights:

> *The old alchemical dream was changing base metals into gold. The new alchemical dream is: changing one's personality—remaking, remodeling, elevating, and polishing one's very self . . . and observing, studying, and doting on it. (Me!)*[19]

Wolfe argued that thirty years of postwar economic prosperity had liberated enough people from everyday material worries to create a boom in narcissism. More and more people were gazing into the mirror of their own feelings and desires. It was expressed not just in the popularity of psychoanalysis but in communal therapy movements such as encounter groups and Erhard Seminars Training (est), as well as yoga circles and meditation retreats.

Introspection began to permeate Western society. Terms such as *self-improvement, self-realization, self-help*, and *personal empowerment* became part of everyday conversation. The political radicalism of the 1960s was gradually giving way to a preoccupation with individual lifestyle. Added into the mix was the growing influence of mass consumer culture, which fed off the enhanced obsession with the self (Buy a car that expresses the "real you!"). Increasingly, people expressed their personal identity through luxury consumption that gave them a taste of wealth, status, and privilege. It was an ideal summed up by artist Barbara Kruger's slogan "I shop therefore I am."[20] The result was a whole generation drawn toward the belief that the pursuit of self-interest—especially the satisfaction of material desires—was the optimal path to personal happiness. "What's in it for me?" became the defining question of the age.

This introspective, self-oriented approach to the art of living was evident in the new wave of "happiness" thinking that emerged in

the late 1990s. Its key figures typically framed the search for happiness as an individualist pursuit and put personal satisfaction on a pedestal. For example, Martin Seligman's book *Authentic Happiness* (2002) carries the subtitle *Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, while Tal Ben-Shahar's *Happier* (2007) has the subtitle *Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment*. These books are about "me" not "we." They are direct descendants of the Me Decade.

Ben-Shahar, whose course on happiness at Harvard has been one of the most popular in the university's recent history, is upfront about his philosophy. "I am no altruist," he insists, "the ultimate reason that I do anything—whether it is spending time with my friends or doing work for charity—is that it makes me happy." Our actions, he writes, "should be guided by self-interest" rather than "the morality of duty." Ben-Shahar's ideas reflect those of the right-wing libertarian thinker Ayn Rand—he founded an organization at Harvard to spread Rand's philosophy—and exemplify the highly individualistic, self-centered approach favored by many of today's happiness gurus.[21] While some happiness thinkers such as Seligman have a broader perspective and discuss the importance of having empathy and compassion for others, for most such traits rarely take center stage and are generally considered a means to the end of personal fulfillment.[22]

The tragedy is that the Age of Introspection, with its intense focus on the self, has not led Western society into the promised land of happiness. Despite the bulging self-help shelves in bookshops and an avalanche of well-intentioned advice from happiness experts, so many people still feel that there is something missing from their lives and that they are not gaining all they can from the rare gift of existence. The evidence is overwhelming. Levels of life satisfaction have barely risen in Western countries despite over half a century of growing material abundance. More than half of all

employees feel unfulfilled in their jobs. The average rate of divorce has reached 50 percent. And there is a rising tide of depression and anxiety: around one in four people in Europe and the United States will experience a mental health problem at some point in their lives.[23] This could hardly be described as a happy state of affairs.

Now is the moment to move beyond the Age of Introspection and try something different. More than two thousand years ago, Socrates advised that the best route to living wisely and well was to "know thyself." We have conventionally thought that this requires self-reflection, by which we look inward and stare into our souls. But we can also come to know ourselves by stepping outside ourselves and learning about lives and cultures that are different from our own. It is time to forge a new Age of Outrospection, and empathy is our greatest hope for doing so.

THE EMPATHIC CHALLENGE

Let's not, however, be naive. Empathy is no universal panacea for all the world's problems or for all the struggles we face in our own lives. It's important to be realistic about what empathy can and cannot achieve. That is why, as I explore the six habits of highly empathic people, I will also be addressing the challenges. Is it possible to empathize too much? Can't empathy be used to manipulate people? Can we really learn to become more empathic? And what about our tendency to care far more about our nearest and dearest than people living in faraway places of which we know little?[24]

These challenges also exist for me on a personal level. I am not writing this book as someone who has mastered the art of empathy and who practices all six habits with ease. Far from it.

I first became interested in empathy in my mid-twenties, after

living for a short time with indigenous Mayan refugees in the Guatemalan jungle, just south of the Mexican border. I saw children dying because they had no access to medical care. I heard stories about massacres by the army. Witnessing the deprivation and insecurity these people faced in daily life opened me up to empathy. Later, as a political scientist and sociologist, I gradually became convinced that the most effective way to achieve deep social change was not through the traditional means of party politics and introducing new laws and policies, but through changing the way people treated each other on an individual basis—in other words, through empathy.

But it was only after leaving academia and researching empathy for around five years that I finally understood why it mattered so much to me. One day I was thinking about how I was affected by my mother's death, when I was ten. Not only did I lose most of my memories from before that age—as often occurs in cases of childhood trauma—but I also became very emotionally withdrawn. I found it difficult to relate to other people's sorrows or equally to feel their joys. I rarely cried and felt extremely distanced from people. And as I sat contemplating this, I suddenly had an epiphany. My interest in empathy was not simply due to what I had seen in Guatemala or what academic conclusions I had drawn about social change, but really stemmed from an unconscious desire to recover the empathic self that I had lost as a child.

So I am still looking for ways to engage the empathic circuitry embedded in my brain and realize my empathic potential as fully as possible.

The concept of empathy has distinct moral overtones. But as you dive into exploring the six habits, you can think of empathizing more as an original and exhilarating form of travel. Why not be daring and travel into the life of another person and see how it

affects who you are and who you want to be? Rather than asking yourself, Where can I go next? ask, Whose shoes can I stand in next? I hope that this book will inspire you to embark on unexpected empathic journeys, leading you to destinations that cannot be found in any tourist guidebooks. If enough of us become empathic travelers, we may well find that we transform the world we live in.