

Empathy

By John Hendry

Director of Student Welfare, Geelong Grammar School

Recent discoveries in brain science and child development are forcing us to rethink the long-held belief that human beings are, by nature, aggressive, materialistic, utilitarian and self-interested. The dawning realization that we are a fundamentally empathetic species has profound and far-reaching consequences for society. At the very core humanity is defined by kindness and forgiveness and the understanding of others.

On the evening of December 24, 1914, at Flanders when the First World War was entering into its fifth month, millions of soldiers were bedded down in makeshift trenches latticed across the European countryside. In many places the opposing armies were dug in within thirty to fifty yards of each other and within shouting distance. The conditions were hellish. The bitter-cold winter air chilled to the bone. The trenches were waterlogged. Soldiers shared their quarters with rats and vermin. Lacking adequate latrines, the stench of human excrement was everywhere. The men slept upright to avoid the muck and sludge. Dead soldiers littered the no-man's land between opposing forces, the bodies left to rot and decompose within yards of their still-living comrades who were unable to collect them for burial.

As dusk fell over the battlefields, something extraordinary happened. The Germans began lighting candles on the thousands of small Christmas trees that had been sent to the front to lend some comfort to the men. The German soldiers began to sing Christmas carols – first Silent Night, then a stream of other songs followed. The English soldiers were stunned. One soldier, gazing in disbelief at the enemy lines, said the blazed trenches looked “like the footlights of a theatre”. The English soldiers responded with applause, at first tentatively, then with exuberance. They began to sing Christmas carols back and forth to their German foes to equally robust applause.

Eventually these men came together in a sense of brotherhood and thousands of soldiers shared the joy of one another's company at Christmas time, sharing life stories, cigarettes, cakes and photos of family. They joked about the absurdity of war. By sunrise on Christmas morning tens of thousands of men – some estimates put the number as high as 100,000 soldiers – talked quietly with one another. Enemies just 24 hours earlier, they found themselves helping each other bury their dead comrades. More than a few pickup soccer matches were reported. Even officers at the front participated, although when news filtered back to the high command in the rear, the generals took a less than enthusiastic view of the affair. Worried that the truce might undermine military morale (and resolve), the generals quickly took measure to rein in their troops.

These men reached out to each other's plight. The strength to comfort each other flowed from a deep unspoken sense of their individual vulnerability and their unrequited desire for the companionship of their fellows. It was, without reserve, a very human moment. Fundamentally this represents what it really means to be human. Humans are, at the core, kind. Research confirms that humans are hard-wired for kindness and this implies forgiveness. These soldiers chose to be human. The central human quality they

expressed was empathy for one another. Human beings have a genetic predisposition – an innate hankering – to seek empathic affiliation and companionship. Empathetic attunement is what is promoted in “emotional intelligence” and this is a critical marker by which we judge the psychological and social development of children. New teaching models designed to transform education from a competitive contest to a more collaborative learning experience are emerging as schools attempt to catch up to a generation that has grown up on the Internet and is used to interacting and learning in open social networks where they share information rather than hoard it. The initiatives in positive education, in meditation and in pastoral care at Geelong Grammar School are nurturing empathetic sensibility and nurturing individuals as they grow to adulthood. The traditional assumption that “knowledge is power” and is used for personal gain is being subsumed by the notion that knowledge is an expression of the shared responsibilities for the collective well-being of humanity, the “we” rather than the “I”. Empathy provides the path from “I” to “we”; empathy leads to less “I” self-destruction to more sharing and caring, from independence to interdependence, from the “iPod” to the “wePod”. Early evaluation and observation of student performance has shown marked improvements in mindfulness, communication skills, and critical thinking as students become more reflective, emotionally attuned, and cognitively adept at comprehending and responding intelligently and compassionately to others. This again has promoted a sense of shared meaning and endeavour, the “we” approach. A kinder approach to living is appearing. A kinder approach to mistake management being implemented through “relationship reparation” at Geelong Grammar School is advancing a more positive outcome from the inevitable mistakes the young make. This compliments the nurturing and empathetic approach which is essential for all in life. Forgiveness presents as the essential ingredient to life relationships, especially in the young where mistakes are in a way licensed through lack of life experience and developing judgement ability.

This empathetic approach to living is now underpinning the more advanced thinking in relation to leadership in life and in business. The neuroscience of “fair play” and the recently discovered mirror neurons endorse the need for empathy to rule. This is a “bottom line” aspect of life and living. Studies of children raised in foundling hospitals early in the 20th century indicated that children deprived of empathy in a nurturing sense were deprived of an essential life skill. Harry Harlow’s famous laboratory study of infant monkeys and their affectional responses (University of Wisconsin, 1958) shocked the world of biology and has spread into the social sciences and other fields. The baby monkeys wanted care, nurture and kind body contact. Empathy was sought. Human nature is not to seek autonomy – to become an island to oneself – but, rather, to seek companionship, affection and intimacy. The conventional belief that equates self-development and self-consciousness with increasing autonomy has begun to lose its intellectual cachet. A number of child development psychologists now argue the contrary – that a sense of selfhood and self-awareness depends on and feeds off deepening relationships to other people. Empathy is the means by which companionate bonds are forged. Were seeking companionship not so basic to our nature, we wouldn’t so fear isolation or ostracization. Facebook would not be such a flourishing enterprise. To be shunned and exiled is to become a nonperson, to cease to exist as far as others are concerned. Empathy is the psychological means by which we become part of other people’s lives and share meaningful experiences. It promotes meaning in living and life. The very notion of transcendence means to reach beyond oneself, to participate with and belong to larger communities, to be embedded in more complex webs of meaning.

Positive Education initiatives are promoting a greater exploration in the education of the young at Geelong Grammar School. The well-being of students is essential to learning and life management. Empathy promotes the understanding of others and the development of more positive relationships. Pastoral care at Geelong Grammar School is constructed upon love and the establishment of positive and enabling

relationships. Love of course is built upon empathy, the capacity to value another beyond the level one values oneself. Relationships are constructed on the contribution one can make to the other, not on what advantage one can gain from the relationship. Empathic relationships are natural and define humanity. Mirror neurons ensure this empathy in an innate way and one has to consciously override this to harm another. The intention to act without empathy, science is clearly showing us, must be a deliberate and learned, therefore practised, response. Geelong Grammar School, through positive education is promoting empathy, promoting what is it to be human and is developing in all students the intuitive strength responses of kindness, forgiveness and the allied strengths of awe, gratitude, the capacity to love and be loved and leadership.

The empathic strength of forgiveness deserves special attention. As Desmond Tutu states "Forgiveness gives us the capacity to make a new start...And forgiveness is the grace by which you enable the other person to get up, and get up with dignity, to begin anew...In the act of forgiveness we are declaring our faith in the future of a relationship and in the capacity of the wrongdoer to change". Forgiveness renews life by finishing unfinished business.....even an unsuccessful attempt at forgiveness has the considerable power of intention. We cannot force forgiveness because it closes the heart, but we can explore its possibilities, its capacity to heal the forgiver, and sometimes the forgiven. To forgive one has to purge oneself of revenge and the want to harm. One's emotional response is driven by the actions of the other person. One must forgive oneself for the emotional response in order to then have the capacity to forgive the other. This is simple once one practices forgiveness however it is tough going at first as we are emotional beings. We are however hardwired to be kind: forgiveness is showing mercy. It is an act of self-compassion. Forgiveness is not transactional - it is transformational. It does not remove what has happened, but it does remove the destructiveness of the impact of what has happened for all parties as best it can. It is enabling. It allows all to "move on". It is found in every faith as the underpinning enabling ethic of behaviour. It is an act of the heart as opposed to the mind. It is about love in every sense.

Forgiveness prompts the employment of the Golden Rule and life is again made enabling for all. It releases us from the overbearing burden of lasting suffering and self-destruction. The Lord's prayer does get it right, (and in the right order). "Forgive us our trespasses as We forgive those who trespass against us". We are, as humans, obliged to forgive if we are to conserve humanity. Without forgiveness there cannot be peace. Without peace there is destruction. As the wonderful book on the Golden Rule states "It all begins with me". We are obliged to take the initiative. The soldiers at Flanders on Christmas day 1914 did just that. The heart must rule for the mind to forgive. Forgiveness permits life to thrive and relationships to be positive. It is based on the belief that all are kind and can be kind. It is fundamental to the health of individuals, families, communities and societies and importantly, to evolution. Without forgiveness contentment is not truly possible. Without forgiveness good decisions cannot be made. Empathy for another is defined by the innate capacity to forgive.