

Date?

How Does Empathy Work? A Writer Explores the Science and Its Applications

By MIMI SWARTZ- nytimes.com

Speaker →

What about the speaker? Values?
Beliefs? Bias?

I FEEL YOU

The Surprising Power of Extreme Empathy

By Cris Beam

251 pp. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. \$26.

Subject-
Swartz is
addressing
this book and
connects it to
empathy in
society

Depending on your point of view, Cris Beam's "I Feel You: The Surprising Power of Extreme Empathy" might seem either laughably behind the times or naïvely, maybe even willfully, ahead — so far beyond our collective horizon as to be pretty darned invisible. After all, ours is an age when the president is more concerned with building walls than feeding and educating poor kids, Congress is polarized to the point of paralysis and just about everyone else is seemingly focused on getting theirs first. We've become a nation of hard cases, armed to the teeth, with fury battling cynicism for primacy as the default emotion. In this world, a book with a cover featuring one bonsai tree leaning lovingly toward another does not appear likely to find much of a place. And yet here is Beam passionately asserting that "the pendulum is swinging back toward feeling, back toward love and the communal. Back toward empathy."

Occasion-
immediate: our
nation seems split,
issues in society
- larger: this book
may help bring
people together

Audience-
- readers of
the book
- people interested
in studying
empathy
- Americans

We can only hope. "I Feel You" is less a prescriptive self-help book than a thoughtful exploration of empathy in all its forms — physiological, historical, sociological and even personal, as Beam struggles to transcend her own less than empathic episodes and explores her aversion to opening herself to change. "Self-empathy was code for selfish," she explains before signing up for a workshop on just that. "One more link in a long chain of American entitlement." This is a radical book because it challenges the conventional wisdom that self-defense and punitive systems are the only way to keep ourselves physically and emotionally safe, and, maybe more important, because it asserts that it's possible to work for the betterment of society without the accompanying side effect of feeling like a chump.

Subject-
background
about the
book and
its impact
on the public
and companies

"I Feel You" is best thought of as a travelogue, with Beam an amiable and skeptical tour guide to places where a new understanding of empathy has led to new, successful applications. It's probably fortunate that she is a believer, but not an easy sell. Beam has done a lot of homework on her subject, and early on provides a lively distinction between genuine attempts at social change and what she calls "empathic design," corporate attempts to make us feel loved or needy or connected — with the goal that we buy more. As a Harvard Business Review story explains, "Enlightened companies are increasingly aware that delivering empathy for their customers, employees and the public is a powerful tool for improving products." Those adorable Facebook emojis are a case in point. Early in the book Beam tackles that default American compulsion to monetize even our deepest emotions, quoting, for instance, the headline of a Forbes article that offers that the best reason to teach empathy is "To Improve Education (and Test Scores)."

But this isn't where Beam puts her emphasis, even though this section is as entertaining as it is damning of American capitalism. She's looking instead for deeper cuts — to understand first

whether empathy is inborn or a skill to be learned, and then, either way, to investigate how it can be applied to some of our most intractable problems. She takes the obligatory trip through the history of how empathy has been studied in the past and journeys to the neuroscience lab to see what discoveries are being made about how humans feel.

Audience:
teachers,
professors,
lawyers

[Some of the solutions she presents for deploying empathy in social situations may be familiar to those working in the fields of education and law. Restorative justice, for instance, “tries to weave a web of understanding and repair. It’s messier than the decontextualized, one-two punch of crime and consequence. It’s a humanized, empathic approach to what is, by design, the passionless metrics of the law.” In practice, this means the student and teacher, or the playground bully and his or her victim, have an opportunity to talk about how they feel, a practice that would probably make the likes of Sean Hannity apoplectic. Special courts for prostitutes and veterans, where their behavior would be placed in context and they would be provided with housing and medical care, would also anger many. To the Fox News crowd, this might be called coddling. But studies of such diversionary programs are showing them to be more effective at preventing and reducing crime than the usual expulsions and prison sentences. And anyway, why not try? Few can claim that our conventional institutions are doing a great job. As Beam suggests, “at a time when the police, the whip-tail of our justice system, are finally being called out for their entrenched and learned brutality, this is the moment for overhaul.”

Approving
tone -
the ideas
expressed in
the book may
be a good idea
in a polarized
world

In fact, much of this book is a gentle manifesto, urging readers to change their view of themselves and others — not a bad idea in such a polarized, screen-dominated age. If you cringe at the idea of attending a conference on nonviolent communication, here’s your chance to explore why, and to try, vicariously, to put yourself in the shoes of a nemesis. It may not be such a good idea to start with XXXL villains like Donald Trump or Nancy Pelosi, but the mirroring exercise Beam recounts is truly — and a little sadly — revealing. Next time you have an argument with a spouse, co-worker or teenager, stop fighting for a minute and try repeating back to them exactly what they’ve said to you, without editorializing or overdramatizing. It’s a humbling experience.

Purpose -
using methods
of empathy
in an argument
can be humbling
or unifying

Shifting from individual to societal empathy, Beam has a moving section on Eugene de Kock, the notorious South African death squad chief who captured, tortured and killed many in the anti-apartheid resistance. Beam wanted to understand how a seemingly ordinary man could become the embodiment of evil, but she goes further to examine how he built a life of remorse during and after his prison term. It is heartening to see him reclaim his humanity by apologizing, one by one, to families of his victims, who can then — sometimes, but not always — let go of their anger and hatred. It’s probably not an idea that will work with garden-variety sociopaths, or religious fundamentalists turned mad bombers, but it doesn’t hurt to be reminded that there is usually some kind of groupthink behind acts of mass terror. If a society has to be rebuilt, as in Rwanda or the former Yugoslavia, then the question becomes how to move forward together. “When they acknowledge wrongdoing and show remorse, what should our response be?” one of Beam’s sources asks. “Should we reject their apology and continue to punish them with our

reflective
tone

hatred? Or should we extend our compassion and invite them to journey with us on the road of moral humanity?"

Purpose-
the book
can lead
people towards
empathy
and can be
studied in
society and
throughout
history

The latter is the tougher job. I wish that, along with her examination of the horrors visited on Native Americans and their subsequent attempts at making peace with their white oppressors, Beam had spent time investigating how empathy has acted between whites and African-Americans — maybe that was just too overwhelming, or too lacking in workable solutions. But even so, "I Feel You" is an important book. If it can't bring us around to empathy, maybe it can at least get us closer to civility. That would be a good start.

Larger occasion - empathy may bring society together if people are willing to understand the ideas she expressed.

hopeful tone