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Toward a Theory of Radical Empathy

Wendy Chin-Tanner · Thursday, January 19th, 2017

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Immigration is the quintessential story of America. If we're not Native American, then we're the descendants of immigrants. America was founded by immigrants, America was built by immigrants, and America runs on the labor of immigrants. To call myself the proud daughter of immigrants is to call myself a proud American.

My father was born the year the Japanese invaded China and immigrated to America at the end of WWII in which my grandfather served in the US Army. Growing up in the Bronx and in rural Louisiana, he's experienced poverty, bigotry, discrimination, medical disability, and stigma. Rather than turning inward, however, my father found meaning and purpose as a young man in political activism. He marched in the Civil Rights movement, served in the VISTA program, protested the Vietnam War, and is still politically active today at almost 80. As my father's daughter, I grew up with the imperative that we must not take our rights for granted and that it is our duty as Americans to stand up for those rights when they're threatened. When we are silent in the face of injustice, we aid and abet that injustice. Not only will silence not keep us safe, but silence is complicity.

As writers, we are first and foremost storytellers. Stories are the reflections and the driving forces of culture. Stories are how we humans make meaning out of our experiences and the world around us. Stories have the power to let us walk in someone else's shoes, to live in someone else's skin, to persuade, and to inspire. But stories also have a negative power, the power to silence, to dismiss, to disenfranchise, to enable injustice, to incite hate and violence.

Jeff Sessions, who has been appointed as our new Attorney General, has called the NAACP "un-American" and said when voting as a Senator against a law banning hate crimes in 2009: "Today I'm not sure women or people with different sexual orientations face that kind of discrimination. I just don't see it."

That's quite a story, isn't it? But in the face of such stories of willful erasure, our best defense as professional storytellers is to keep telling our stories, stories that reflect and amplify the true range of our American experience.

Writers Resist is our collective effort at mobilizing our stories to rebuild an America that embodies our best ideals, an America that is truly by the people, for the people, with liberty and justice for all the people, for all the women, for all the people of color, for all the LGBT people, for all the

disabled people, for all the people on the margins, for all of us. We are all Americans, like it or not. Like it or not, we are all in this together.



For Portland Oregon's Writers Resist event, Cheryl Strayed and I collaborated on a live broadcast of her podcast Dear Sugar Radio at the Aladdin Theater as a fundraiser for six local organizations: [ACLU of Oregon](#), [Planned Parenthood Columbia Willamette](#), [Basic Rights Oregon](#), [Unite Oregon](#), [Oregon Environmental Council](#), and [Literary Arts](#). With performances from powerhouse writers Lidia Yuknavitch, Samiya Bashir, Cari Luna, Rene Denfeld, Zahir Janmohamed, and Sam Roxas-Chua, and musicians Angela Freeman, Colin Meloy, and Wonderly, we raised \$18k to help mitigate in a substantive way the devastating effects of legislations that are coming to pass.

As part of my contribution to the evening, I helped to answer a letter that was sent to Cheryl Strayed and Steve Almond, aka The Sugars. The following is the letter and an expanded version of my response.

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Dear Sugars,

What does radical empathy look like in this post-election landscape?

How do I love—or even share a meal with—someone who voted for a man who hired a white nationalist as his senior adviser? How do I have empathy for them while also supporting the many people Trump's policies will oppress? How do I let go of my anger when a 7-year-old says she's scared her mother will be deported? How do we move forward from here?

-Angry and Sad

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Dear Angry and Sad,

Half the country is with you. And as the daughter of immigrants, as the mother of two little girls, and as a survivor of sexual abuse, sexual assault, and rape, believe me, I am right there with you. I'm so very angry and sad, too.

I wonder why we think, though, that empathy means we can't be angry or sad. I think this idea that we have to first let go of anger before being able to move forward and have empathy isn't quite right. Don't we have to honor our own emotions before being able to authentically honor someone else's? It's like how when the oxygen masks drop on a plane, we have to put on our own mask before helping others with theirs. Otherwise, we wind up compromising ourselves. So empathy and anger aren't mutually exclusive.

Like many of us, the place where I have occasion to practice empathy most often is in my marriage. If my husband and I have a disagreement, I don't have to subliminate my anger in order to listen to his point of view. For me to listen to him with empathy, I have to stand firm in my own position and express myself honestly, too. And part of the bargain is that he has to do the same thing. By staying clear and firm in the validity of my own experience, I can see how my husband's experience is distinct from mine, and from there, I can imagine how things might look and feel

from where he stands. Rather than creating an impasse or stalemate, this process tends to actually build intimacy and respect.

The goal of a good marriage isn't to never argue. So maybe, just like in a marriage, we Americans should stop trying not to argue and try instead to argue well. That means fighting hard, but fighting fair. That means expressing ourselves honestly and then actively listening to the other person. Active listening is listening not with the goal of crafting a response or rebuttal, but listening with the simple goal of understanding where the other person is coming from.

Of course, that's not going to be possible a hundred percent of the time. While arguing is healthy in a good marriage, arguing and even relationship therapy are in fact contraindicated in abusive relationships because they can enable further abuse. The same can be said for any kind of abusive or oppressive situation. So how can we tell what kind of situation is safe and healthy to engage in and what kind of situation is dangerous and unproductive? How can we maintain our own position while understanding someone else's even if we are radically opposed? In other words, how does Radical Empathy work on a functional level?

What I propose is a two-step plan for Radical Empathy where step one is Self Empathy and step two is Strategic Empathy. What if Self Empathy means having empathy for ourselves, so that step one is to honor our own emotions even in the face of defensiveness, blame-shifting, minimization, and gaslighting? Techniques like gaslighting, blame-shifting, and minimization create distance between our sense of self and our experience of reality. That's where empathy for the self comes in. When our sense of self is splintered by techniques designed to fracture us into a double positionality, even to the extent of manipulating us into identifying with abusers or oppressors, Self Empathy enables us to resist that pressure and empathize with the parts of ourselves that have been othered, whether by shame or alienation, or some other mode of manipulation. Self Empathy prevents us from inadvertently colluding with oppressive narratives and internalizing their discourses. If we work from that basis, then we can use Self Empathy as a tool for discerning what is and isn't productive to engage with, which in turn creates space for the possibility of step two, Strategic Empathy.

Strategic Empathy is an idea that stems from the anthropological principle of cultural relativism. Not to be confused with moral relativism, cultural relativism is a tool for understanding the internal logic of different thought and belief systems even if they seem irrational to the researcher. The goal is to then develop culturally appropriate forms of intervention. If we adapt this approach to our current situation, then we can use Strategic Empathy to help us maintain our own point of view while understanding the context and reasoning of someone else's even if we don't agree with them, even if we're angry at them, and even if we can't find it within ourselves to love them. From there, we have a starting point for finding the kinds of arguments and interventions that might actually get through to the people we're talking to.

When we're interacting with someone who's on the other side of the empathy wall, if we have no basis for understanding one another, it doesn't matter how many times we say something or how loudly we say it. They won't be able to hear us. Maybe this two-step Radical Empathy plan can at least get us to a point of having actual conversations (with those who are willing and capable) rather than debates and shouting matches.

Now, some people feel that the time for empathy is over. Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, for example,

about how empathy is a privilege. Well, maybe it is and maybe now is the time to cash in on that privilege, to not just recognize it, but leverage it.

Racism has become a word that makes people recoil and get defensive and say, “No, no, no, not me! How dare you!” But let’s take it out of the personal context and look at it as a neutral systemic phenomenon. In Critical Race Theory, the definition of racism is Prejudice + Power. What this means is that anyone can be prejudiced but racism as a system only works if it has systemic power backing it up. And our country has that in spades. Similarly, sexism is Prejudice + Power. This means that women can be prejudiced against men (and other women), but without the whole setup backing them up, their prejudice is not technically sexism.

Racism and sexism are part of our Cultural Matrix along with classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination. We’re all in the Matrix together. So those who can see the Matrix would really benefit from working towards liberating those who can’t see it yet. This idea forms the basis of intersectional social activism.

But even before we get into it with the Trump supporters, let’s face the fact that we have plenty of divisions on our own side of the street. Everyone is triggered and everyone is defensive. So how do we get out of that state of stasis? How do we get someone to see something they don’t want to see? Is it impossible? I don’t think so, because don’t most of us manage it with our kids and partners on a regular basis?

We know from child psychology that the development of empathy hinges on intimate and healing experiences of recognition. We grow empathy in children by mirroring to them that we understand and share their pain. Without empathy, we go into fight or flight states of hyper vigilance or are overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness. Empathy depends on being accurately understood, but it doesn’t depend on agreement. That’s the key. We can have empathy for someone while still disagreeing with them. And once someone feels heard, they’re in a much better position to hear us back. One of the best ways I’ve found to get my kids to understand a position that’s opposed to their own is to tell them a story that helps them identify with a different point of view.

Now, most social justice activists would say that these aren’t children we’re dealing with and marginalized folks have already been called upon to do way too much heavy lifting in terms of empathy and emotional labor. And that’s absolutely true.

But at the same time, people need imaginative bridges so that they can identify with positionalities and experiences that are outside of their own. Radical Empathy is strategically beneficial because it allows us, without compromising ourselves, to meet people where they are and give them a place to go. If someone is painted into a corner, they’re not going to come out. The absence of an active praxis in empathy results too often in mutual gaslighting because it’s human nature to get defensive, double down, dismiss, and lash out when we feel threatened.

It’s important to note that we must be mindful of how much capital we’ve got in our relative empathy accounts. People with more privilege should have more empathy to spend. If I’m in a position where I’m not immediately threatened and I have privilege relative to the person I’m trying to talk to, then maybe I’m in a better position to take the first step in listening. And if I’m in a position where I’m not immediately threatened and I have privilege relative to someone who is being threatened, it’s my responsibility as an ally to step up and intervene.

Empathy hinges on emotional labor. To have empathy, we have to be able to practice active listening, be reflexive, self-critical, and be able to act on constructive criticism. In our culture, women are more readily expected to practice these skills and are socialized to do more emotional labor, which is why intersectional feminism is at the forefront of social justice allyship.

Men, on the other hand, aren't asked in our culture to do much emotional labor by anyone except, in some cases, their domestic partners. This makes me think that family and relationship counseling might be an effective model for understanding how to create a two-step plan for Radical Empathy that's intersectional. Because family counseling hinges on empathy as its basic tenet while acknowledging the differences of power that may exist between partners, the goal is for both partners to be acknowledged, mirrored, and heard.

In my own marriage, for example, there are some stark inequities of power. I'm a woman. And I'm a person of color. My husband is a man and he's white. Our marriage, especially now, would be in big trouble if we didn't explicitly acknowledge those power differences. We've had some pretty unsettling but ultimately intimacy building conversations in the past couple of months as the election has brought external politics crashing into our home. Now more than ever before, what the second wave feminists said is true. The personal is political," and it's often painful to acknowledge that truth.

But empathy has to begin from a basis of truth. To begin the process of healing, we have to first reckon with the truth. Reckoning means naming and acknowledging the inherited inequities of power that we live with and acknowledging the internalization of those inequities. We have a complicated truth in our country. We have an intersectional truth.

It's true that we have racism and that creates certain experiences. It's true that we have sexism and that creates different experiences. It's true that we have economic inequalities that have created a struggling working class, some (though certainly not all) of whom are white and they are affected by yet another set of truths. The same goes for ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and on and on, in layer upon layer of truth.

We must be capable as a country of listening to the multiple truths of our intersectional society without privileging or compromising any of them. Maybe Radical Empathy will help us get there. Or maybe that's what Radical Empathy actually is.

With Radical Empathy, Wendy

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