

# Homo empaThicus?

FRIK LANDMAN WRITES

Recent media coverage has highlighted interesting issues in our society. Two in particular caught the attention: one was the obvious and inevitable conflict of egoistic needs of those for and against nationalisation, and the other the celebration of the birthday of a beloved member of our society, past president Nelson Mandela. The former has to do with the colliding worlds of those promoting and those dealing with 'white guilt'. In the case of the latter, most of us came together across creed, race and gender and celebrated this individual in a way that we celebrate no other.

What is it in the behaviour and conduct of especially leaders – political, business, academic, etc. – that either brings people together or splits and keeps them apart? Upon reflection, these matters remind me of Pascal's cautionary note: *'The heart has its reasons which reason knows not of'*.

Stepping back and considering for a moment the scientific label given to human beings, *Homo sapiens* (wise man/ape), and then juxtaposing this to the reported observations in our society, this label is rather ironic. At the same time, we, as thinking beings, know deep within our social nature lies our affective, loving ability, which we observe and experience in our daily lives through small acts of kindness – offered to or by us. It is here where empathy, or *empaThicus*, enters the stage.

*EmpaThicus* is a word with a creative 'T', a letter that offers a vertical and horizontal view of our identity. Vertically, we develop, from infancy, a distinct personality and we become aware of ourselves as a discrete and separate person from others. However, this vertical development on its own brings with



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it the potential danger of the individual threatening the social collective of which we all are part. The developed individuality really only offers meaning in the context of horizontal development: *viz.* being able to live and move among others; being able to see and think differently from others, yet able to engage in a meaningful dialogue with others, understanding that our individuality has significance only among others.

Empathy respects own individuality and that of the others with whom we form a society. In that sense it has a joining, bonding quality but it does not absorb our individuality, forcing us into agreement or approval. In the confidence of who we are, what we value, what our rights are, we allow others' opinions and beliefs to enter our world and still maintain our identity and what we represent.

So what exactly is empathy? In very simple terms it is our understanding of how it is for that other person, being able to feel the emotions of another person based on our willingness to understand the other's position and situation. The neuroscientists speak of 'mirror neurons' in our brains. The same neurons light up in our brain as in those of another person whom we observe experiencing a particular situation. The association of someone's pains with our own past experience or even just imagining how we would have felt had we been in that person's shoes makes the same neurons fire in our brain as in the other person's actual experience.

What value does empathy offer us? It is the saving grace of any society. No society is sustainable without empathy. A society cannot survive if everyone is only caring for him- or herself. The ability and the willingness to feel for others to the extent of the other 'feeling felt' is in fact the key to the survival of *Homo sapiens* as *Homo empaThicus*.

Our society still needs to heal. Empathy is an essential need if we, all of us, want to process the consequences of our past, and if we want to build up the necessary social capital and trust that a healthy society thrives on. Healing and sustaining a healthy society requires empathy. It allows us to learn in a collaborative way, listening to others and their opinions in a way that not only makes them feel felt or heard, but in a way that offers us the possibility to make our paradigms more porous and considerate of conflicting ideas and opinions. This ability transforms a politician into a statesman and a statesman into someone that serves with wisdom and courage, and empathically draws disparate individuals into a cohesive and productive society.

A society is built on relationships and the quality thereof hinges on the presence of empathy. Without it, we may still stay together but then merely as *Homo averiticus* – only aware of each other's bodies, consumed by self-interest and greed, and with no sense of the inner life of others, no sense of that which makes us human. *Homo empaThicus*. 

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