



## HEARTLESS YOUTH? GROWING COMPASSION AND EMPATHY IN OUR KIDS

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Are our youth heartless? A University of Michigan survey suggests this might be the case. My personal experience and field research with parents points to another story. It is about us and the role we play in the lives of young people in our orbit.

Today's college students are 40% less empathetic than the same age group in 1980 according to the study by Sara Konrath. That's an alarming statistic. It has implications for all of us about compassion, empathy and kindness to one another. I've heard reactions that blame technology and social media. That's a cheap blame game.

My on the ground conversations with parents all reveal that the greater empathy killers may be adults. Almost every adult has young people in the orbit of our lives. If it takes a village to raise a child, how do we proactively care about the messages that our actions signal to young people?

There are five steps that each of us can incorporate into our lives and, by implication, those with whom we interact. They have to do with values, giving, service, stories and gleaning.

**Values.** The actions we take, the choices we make as adults are like Tweets. They are powerful shorthand communications to the young people around us. One mother told me about taking her young child to the shelter for homeless women that she volunteered at once a month.

The women of the shelter gravitated to her daughter. "Tell us about your school. Do you have a home to live in? Do you have friends?" they wanted to know. As mother and daughter left the shelter the young girl said, "It's really cold outside Mom; do all women have a place to sleep?" Her Mom believes in truthful answers and so she said, "No, but these women do. That's why we need places like this to provide a bed until they can get a home."

Years later this same child orchestrated efforts in a local community to raise money to feed the hungry. A value had been tweeted to her daughter. A child had created a human connection with people she would not ordinarily meet.

*Giving.* The unique interests of young people invite giving. A father and son have bonded in their mutual passion for baseball which has become an opportunity to give. Last summer the son volunteered in a baseball camp in the Dominican Republic. Driven by his passion the son was unprepared for the experience of being a minority in a culture different than his own but the sports field offered a meeting ground for discovery and learning. Understanding and empathy were shaped by this experience – for the baseball coach and the campers.

There is no hierarchy in giving as one parent offered with this wisdom, “Let your children’s passions drive their giving.” Adults can add context. Holiday celebrations - from Chanukah to Ramadan, to the Festival of Lights and Christmas - invite conversation about what they mean and the transformation that they point to. Secular holidays from - July Fourth to Labor Day and Martin Luther King - invite stories about giving of ourselves to something larger than our self-interest.

Opportunities to give of ourselves are bountiful. When young people, encouraged by adults, share their passions with others they discover common ground with others.

*Service.* Parents repeatedly talk about the importance of service projects. Some even select schools which place a significant emphasis on service for their children. One parent told me that the most important service projects for her children have come from her children’s seemingly “silly” ideas. “Follow the lead of your kids” she urged.

Her six year old had experienced a homeless tent encampment and was determined to make peanut butter and honey sandwiches for people living there. Knowing that these particular sandwiches might not be the most helpful food to make this mom did not say that it was a “silly” idea. Instead they agreed to take food to the camp on a pre-determined future day. In the build up to it, mom and daughter went shopping for food items that could be used in the camp. On the scheduled delivery day they took the bags of food along with a small platter of peanut butter and honey sandwiches.

A parent listened to the lead and intuition of her child. It became an opportunity to talk about the food that might be most needed but also honored the heartfelt idea behind the sandwiches. Several parents spoke to me about the importance of intuitive, spontaneous service ideas generated by young people. Adult awareness and listening to the desire to serve is as illuminating as the orchestrated service projects of a school, faith or community group.

**Stories!** The adults who took time to share the stories of their lives expanded my world and engaged my imagination as a child. A young person's experience can be an equally powerful story. A mom accompanied her nine year old daughter on a choir trip to Nicaragua. Arriving a few days before the rest of the group, they were given a tour of a garbage dump where children live and scavenge for food.

The guide offered this advice about a potentially harrowing experience, "Look for one child in the dump. Concentrate only on that one child. Look into his or her face." A young boy was among the first to climb onto a newly arrived garbage truck hoping for the first choice of trash from which to eat. As the young girl focused on him he tried to stare her down and finally broke out in a broad smile, waved and ran off.

That night the daughter did not want to write in her Nicaragua journal about the experience but asked her mom to. "Only if you let me read back to you what I've heard you say to make sure I've it right" said the mom. Now headed to college this young woman never forgets the story of the young boy foraging for food in a garbage dump. It is part of her DNA and story about compassion, empathy and kindness.

An innovative program offered by the organization, *Bridges to Understanding*, uses technology for digital storytelling. Young people across the world share digital stories. A child in the United States listens to and experiences the story of a child in India, Ghana or Colombia. Technology is not the enemy!

Modeling how to tell stories and encouraging the telling of stories invites imagining living in the shoes of another person. Imagination births empathy, compassion and kindness.

**Glean.** No matter your own spiritual tradition, gleaning from the wisdom of faith traditions is a way to invite reflection on values, service, giving and stories. How does the Buddhist concept of happiness for all people relate to the experiences of adults and young people? Is there a meeting point between this and Christian notions of love and compassion, Jewish ideas of repairing the world and Muslim injunctions to give to good works?

Gleaning from the treasure trove of spirituality is about more than the wisdom offered. It becomes an opportunity to talk with young people about the people who practice a variety of faith traditions. Gleaning invites imagining the life of a Buddhist child in Bhutan, a Christian in Ethiopia, a Jew in Argentina, a Muslim in Indonesia, and a Sikh in India or a Hindu in London.

The plunging rates of empathy in college students will shift to the degree that adults understand that we each create encouragement about kindness, compassion and

empathy by the way we engage with the youth in our orbit. Our values, giving, service, stories and gleaning are on display with every action and word we take.

Empathy killers or empathy creators? We're all in this together.