

Empathy in Berkeley

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Berkeley always surprises. As I walk along Shattuck Avenue toward the central city plaza, I notice a tent next to the BART station. I don't believe the Native Americans are protesting, so I approach the tent and see a large sign saying "Empathy Tent". A young man approaches me and asks if I would like him to listen to me. Since I'm in a hurry, I decline. A second man offers me a tiny chocolate kiss. I am in the need for something sweet, so I'm happy to take it as well as additional information on where to receive empathy. The irony of this situation is that I am currently reading *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World* by Jamil Zaki, a professor at Stanford.

The tent and the book seem to represent a response to the cry of loneliness, isolation, and fractured relationships. At a time when the Internet promises the endless possibility of connectedness, many feel disconnected from others. Zaki's book explains that empathy is not merely a feeling what others feel,

rather it "refers to several different ways we respond to each other. These include identifying what others feel (cognitive empathy), sharing their emotions (emotional empathy), and wishing to improve their experience (empathetic concern)." Although Zaki does not discuss core values, it seems that all types of empathy are rooted in the ideal of love, a desire to seek the benefit, welfare, and happiness of others.

While media drowns us in "emotional fatigue", a numbing drum of our sensibilities, empathy awakens us to the needs of the other. While we may be born with a certain level of empathy (for we are born for relationship), empathy can be developed or destroyed. The Dalai Lama spends several hours a day meditating on loving kindness, while a mass murderer has lost all sense of the value of others.

At The Principled Academy we help children identify and control their emotions, so that they can choose to make positive relations with others: to listen, to care, and to enhance the well-being of others and their own capacity to love. Zaki emphasizes the value of fiction in allowing a reader to enter into the world of another, thus awakening the power of empathy. The curriculum we choose at The Principal Academy is designed to stimulate and awaken the sense of empathy in students and staff. I re-read John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* this summer, and several times I had to close the book and wipe tears from my eyes because of the suffering of characters in the novel.

Zaki explains that "fiction is empathy's gateway drug. It helps us feel for others when real world caring is too difficult, complicated, or painful." If in early childhood education we promote social and emotional learning, as adults we will have a better chance to develop an empathetic world. When Zaki titles his book *The War for Kindness*, he recognizes that it is critical and difficult to impact the callousness of public life. If public figures toss out insults and verbal violence several times a day, it encourages a similar response from others. Every institution in a culture can help us develop greater empathy and care for others, or it can diminish us.