

A ROAD TO EMPATHY

AMID TECHNOLOGY, URBANITY & COMMERCIALISM

by T.Collins Logan

Empathy is invaluable because it is the gateway to effective loving kindness. First it softens our heart to the needs of others and to the gentle longings within ourselves we might otherwise overlook. Then it helps us discern the most appropriate and skillful action in the moment. Without empathy, we are less able to discern the most insightful and effective efforts we should undertake, because we cannot generate a heart-centered connection with those we are trying to help. Without a heart-centered connection, without experiencing the *felt sense* of someone else's personal challenges, a crucial element will be absent from our giving and receiving; we will miss out on an entire layer of meaning and purpose in our exchanges. Developing a robust capacity for empathy lays an unshakeable foundation for the positive potential of each and every act – whether listening attentively, or speaking the right words at the right time, or providing the most appropriate support in each unique situation, or knowing when to withdraw entirely from unskillful interactions. Empathy allows us to nourish and be nourished at the deepest and most sustaining levels.

Sometimes sympathy can be confused with empathy. But where sympathy attaches kind-hearted feelings to someone else's experience, empathy opens us up to experiencing someone else's world as if it were our own. Sympathy maintains isolation between the I/Me/Mine and the Other, distancing us from that for which we have sympathetic feelings. But empathy relaxes those boundaries, widening our arenas of affection to honor and encompass others as part of our experience. So when I empathize with someone else's situation, I encounter it directly, as if it were happening to me, and my response is likewise as immediate and committed as if I were standing in their shoes. Unlike sympathy, this response is not always

gentle, quiet or subtle. I may be moved to righteous anger at another's mistreatment, for example. Or I may be moved to gut-wrenching grief because of their suffering. Or I may shout out loud and jump for joy because of their victory. If we are empathically connected, I begin to feel what you feel, I tap into the experience that you experience, and that connection informs my reactions. In the same way, when I empathize with my own inner experiences, I am more intimately connected with those experiences than if I observe them analytically or just feel sympathy for myself. I indwell whatever I empathize with in the present moment, rather than setting it aside for later inspection.

At the other extreme, empathy should not be confused with overidentification, either. When we empathize with others, we do not become them or enmesh our identity with theirs. Likewise, accurate empathy for our inner experiences does not synthesize our sense of self. We can inhabit the *felt sense* that empathy enables, but we should avoid becoming that felt sense. As I empathize, I embrace the depth of my own pain, have compassion for it, and begin to heal. If instead I begin to identify with that pain rather than empathize with it, I become "the person who is in pain," a helpless victim who cannot find a way to healing. As I empathize with someone else, I appreciate and celebrate their success, soaring with them for a while. If I begin to identify with that success, I may want to *become* that person, either vicariously living my life through them or competing with them for similar status. So just as with any other aspect of holistic well-being, effective empathy operates within a finely balanced range of optimal function – not too aloof and not too enmeshed, but at just the right level of involvement.

With this rough approximation of empathy, we can begin to ask some questions about the availability and frequency of empathy in the world today. Does modern culture facilitate empathic connections? Do technology, urbanity and commercialism influence how empathy develops in Western society? I have lived most of my life in the United States, so I will confine my observations to what I have encountered here. As there are undoubtedly pockets of the

U.S. that have escaped the cultural homogenization of mass media, the permeation of technology and the crowding of cities, I'll focus my generalizations on the mainstream, majority populations that occupy urban centers across the country. Despite the many exciting variations in culture from region to region in the U.S., I believe the strongest influences on the development of empathic connections are pervasive. We find the same factors everywhere: the same PCs, cell phones and PDAs, the same fast food chains, the same big box retailers, the same talk radio programs, the same popular music, the same movies and TV shows, the same pharmaceuticals, the same automobiles and traffic signals, the same corporate work environments, the same fads and consumer habits, the same pollutants and carcinogens, the same politics and race relations, the same class distinctions, the same sports and recreations, the same flavor and substance of news...*the same sameness*. The breadth and depth of homogeneity infiltrating our vast culture is truly stunning, so it is that sameness I will call upon to lever the majority of conclusions.

THE ANTAGONISTS OF EMPATHY

Some things support the development of empathic connection, and some things do not. Understanding both the readily observable antagonists of empathy and their more subtle expressions is the first step in remedying interfering influences. After that, we can explore how to further mitigate those antagonists, and eventually how to reverse the tide. Here are a few scenarios with which most of us can personally relate:

- Running late for work in rush hour traffic.
- Holiday shopping.

- Obtaining a ticket and a good seat for a popular movie opening.
- A child's tantrum at a public event while their parents ignore the disruption.
- Finding a parking space in a busy parking lot.
- Belligerent shoppers haranguing beleaguered sales employees.
- Waiting in a long line at fast food restaurant with only a half-hour lunch break.
- Trying to get a complex question answered on a customer support line.
- People talking on cell phones, texting, or otherwise disconnecting at a social function.
- The home computer crashing when we most rely on it.
- A few people's recreation interfering with safety, calm or quiet of everyone around them.

What do all of these situations have in common? For one, they represent a unique intersect of influential factors that has never existed before our current time; factors that, individually, might not disrupt empathy altogether. However, taken together in their unique modern synergy, they can be extremely disruptive to the empathic process. Let's take a look at each one individually, and then examine the power of their combined effect.

Technology

Two hundred years is the blink of an eye in the great arc of homo sapiens' earthly existence, and yet two hundred years ago we didn't have automobiles, cell phones, radio, TV, fast food, movie theatres or a thousand other technologies that have radically altered our lifestyle. On the one hand, technology has accelerated nearly every aspect of day-to-day life, making each activity a race against the clock so that we can pack more and more *doing* into each moment. To procure meals quickly, to commute quickly, to make decisions quickly, to communicate quickly, to find answers quickly, to satisfy our needs quickly – everything has to be done with the utmost conservation of time and effort so as to create room for additional, equally speedy activity. And although it is not the main impetus for this drive toward speediness, technology has been its most prodigious advocate and facilitator. And all of this apparent efficiency has a cost. Fast food – whether from the drive-thru or from our freezer to our microwave – is, in general, less healthy than food prepared more slowly with proper nutrition in mind. Rapid communication – texting, a logistical telephone call, reflexive email, a barked command, a power lunch, etc. – eliminates nuance, complexity, emotional connection and expansive vocabularies from our interactions. Quick decisions often do not take into account broader, multidimensional information or the subtleties of indirect consequences. In striving to get from one place to another as fast as we can, we may miss a lot of beauty along the way, or get into a car accident, or forget to kiss our loved ones goodbye. And so on. Technology helps us rush through life so that we can declare we are oh-so-very-busy. While this may imbue our lives with a façade of variety and importance, it really reduces the substance and distinctiveness of each moment.

On the other hand, technology has reinforced or augmented a handful of our natural attributes while allowing others to languish. For example, I may gain better eye-hand coordination from playing video games, while the rest of my body atrophies. I may become very adept at trading witty quips on the phone or on the web, while my ability to pick up on body language and

subtle intonation is lost. I may be able to regulate my mood with caffeine, nicotine and pharmaceuticals, but I concurrently weaken my ability to consciously manage my mood without those resources. Likewise, if I depend on a hundred different technologically perfected chemicals to look healthy on the outside and feel healthy on the inside, I am not allowing my body to find its own equilibrium – I am instead suppressing one set of innate healthy functions while trying to enhance others. In countless ways, technology corrals us into overemphasizing one dimension of our being while neglecting others.

Technology has also delivered huge amounts of information right into the heart of our lives. This seems a blessing in that we have instant access to whatever topics we wish to explore from almost any location. But it is also a curse in that the quality, context and accuracy of that information are unreliable. Technology has gifted us with endless factoids, while burdening us with the illusion of knowledge. Whether watching talk shows, searching the Internet or reading the fine print on cereal boxes, we are as likely to be edified with meaningful insight through these avenues as we would randomly asking the opinions of strangers while running rapidly past them. Technology has delivered us mountains of raw data without any dependable, accessible tools to evaluate that data, and so we remain in the dark about what is true, useful and good while enlarging a mistaken belief that we have a bona fide oracle in our hip pocket.

Along similar lines, technology provides a substitution for authentic nourishment in other dimensions as well. Instead of cultivating a healthy social life, we can watch our favorite sitcoms. Instead of interacting with our family, we can obsess over email. Instead of eating whole, fresh, local food that would sustain and strengthen us, we can nibble at sugary, salty and fatty quasifood extruded from tanks in a faraway factory. Instead of an intimate connection with a partner, we have porn. Instead of reinforcing a purpose for our life, we can escape into countless distractions or medicate away our conscience. Because technology has

provided us with limitless choices that are immediately available, we can consume endlessly without a thought for the quality of that nourishment.

So, to summarize, technology contributes to several of the most influential factors in modern human interaction:

- The speed with which we interact with each other;
- An emphasis and prioritization of a limited number of human skills or dimensions throughout that interaction, and to the exclusion of others;
- Huge amounts of unqualified information that colors these exchanges with a false impression of knowledge; and
- An ample availability of substitute nourishment that can prevent other, higher quality interactions from occurring.

That said, technology alone does not create barriers to empathy – it merely provides some tools and circumstances to set the stage. For empathic connection to be fully disrupted, other colluding factors must be present.

Urban Population Density

Population growth in the U.S. over the past hundred years has lagged behind general global trends, but the increase is still staggering. Not only has the number of people expanded exponentially, but that growth has been concentrated in large, sprawling urbanized areas.

Those numbers are not insignificant. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the total U.S. © 2009-2015 Integral Lifework Center

population increased some 100 million between 1970 and 2008 for a total of 304 million – double what it was in 1950. And according to the CIA's *World Factbook*, global population between 1950 and 2008 increased some 270%, from 2.5 billion to 6.7 billion. As the title of a January, 2007 Christian Science Monitor article declares: "In 2008, Most People Will Live In Cities." And according to projections cited by a June, 2006 BBC report, this trend will continue until two thirds of the world's population resides in urban areas – possibly as soon as 2050. Globally, much of this concentration already occurs in megacities like Tokyo, Sao Paulo, Mexico City, New York and Mumbai, and such huge, densely populated metropolitan areas are likely to continue emerging elsewhere around the globe. In the U.S., if you add the population of just 200 of most highly populated cities, you end up with 77 million, over 25% of the total U.S. population.

Whether humanity ends up doubling or tripling every fifty years, there is a growing realization that planet Earth cannot continue to support such growth, especially in light of certain trends. The rapid depletion of her natural resources, for example, or the extinction of tens of thousands of plant and animal species each year, or increasingly extreme climate change. These events, in largest part the result of past and present human demands on the Earth, do not bode well for our existing population, let alone a larger one. However, setting the question of a sustainable relationship with the Earth aside, we can examine some more immediate and personal impacts of population trends when we consider what occurs in our largest urban centers.

There are countless studies that detail the violence, crime, disease and poverty that are concentrated in big cities. I'd like to focus on something less statistically measurable, but equally grave, and that is the gradual alienation of people from each other in high density populations in the U.S. What causes this alienation? Perhaps it is in part an aggressiveness spurred by increased competition for the same limited resources in metropolitan areas. Perhaps it the result of a necessary shutting down of human interfacing – a closing off of

receptivity and generosity toward other people – when the barrage of demands, impositions and manipulations of a steady stream of strangers becomes too insistent. Perhaps it is the artificial separation from the natural world that encourages forgetfulness of our interdependence. Perhaps it is the restless transience of urban populations that undermines trust between city dwellers. Perhaps it is the inherent anonymity of living in such dense populations that allows people to excuse themselves from recognizing the needs or suffering of others – or even be accountable for their own misdeeds. Perhaps it is all of these things. But whatever the reasons, the alienation presents itself in many forms.

A woman screams for help in an apartment building, but none of the other tenants respond in any way. An elderly person has fallen on the sidewalk and now sits on the curb, despondently waiving and calling out to cars that speed past but do not stop. A young child is lost and wandering tearfully about a mall, but no one thinks to help them find their parents. A couple is fighting and yelling constantly in their home, but their neighbors ignore them. A homeless person is passed out in a pool of their own vomit, and business people step gingerly around them on the way to work. This is one face of alienation: an indifference to suffering, a seeming callousness to the plight of fellow human beings.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is a sort of vacantly reflexive generosity – empty gestures that mimic what was once an integral part of a community's social contract to care for each other. This is a less obvious aspect of alienation, but it is no less destructive to interpersonal connections. For through our reflexive generosity the addict gets their fix, the professional panhandler reaps illicit gain, and illegitimate or inept charities cultivate donors, but all the while no authentic healing or intimacy occurs. By giving reflexively to vague emblems of need, we absolve ourselves of having empathic relationships with those we could really help. By assuaging a lingering guilt that we should do some good for our fellows, we divorce ourselves from understanding the needs we are trying to meet. And because we heed the

loud, showy and persistent swindlers, the quiet suffering of the truly desperate goes unnoticed.

Lastly, somewhere amid our indifference and empty gestures lies a primitive and aggressive competitiveness. To physically force our way into the elevator ahead of other people. To cut in front of someone who has waited patiently for an available gas pump. To forcefully advocate “not in my backyard” attitudes regarding communal needs, while recklessly imposing our own opinions and values on that same community. To threaten and complain, or instigate frivolous lawsuits, or spread malicious gossip. To dismiss the impact of all such arrogant behavior on others, and disregard the well-being of the poor, sick or socially marginalized. In other words, to allow the strong to dominate the weak. This is the bull of rugged individualism prancing through the china shop of an already precarious social cohesion. Why should I respect common courtesy, or even the rule of law, if I can get away with less for my own convenience? Safe within my cocoon of anonymity, I can lord it over others to get my way.

These are some of the modern urban factors that combine with technology to numb our empathy, disconnecting us from our fellow human beings and the world around us. In a moment, we will examine the nexus of all such factors in more detail, but first let's consider just a couple of combinations. What happens when we mingle urban aggressiveness and competitiveness with the rushed daily commute? Searing frustration, obscene hand gestures, road rage and car accidents. What happens when we combine callous indifference with cell phones, car radios and home entertainment systems? Disruptively loud and intrusive noise in places that had previously remained quiet and relaxed for everyone's enjoyment. And so on. We are impatient when we are placed on hold in a phone call. We are frustrated to wait in a self-checkout line at the grocery store. Without a second thought, we dump toxic chemicals down a sewer drain or start a wildfire with a discarded cigarette. In these and countless other

ways, technology and urbanity act in concert to sever our connection to ourselves, our community and the Earth.

There is, I believe, one other major contributor to empathic deterrence. In the U.S., it is as pervasive as technology and burgeoning urban populations, and increasingly rears its voracious head all around the globe. Since there is no existing term that adequately expresses the extent and severity of this particular influence, I'd like to coin a new one: *commercialist solegoism*.

Commercialist Sologoism

Solipsism is the belief that no reality exists beyond my lone self-awareness. Egoism is the promotion of self-interest above all else, even at the expense of others. Sologoism is the conviction that the only needs, opinions, wants or impulses relevant to all of human existence are my own, and that everything outside myself is but a mirror and facilitator of my self-serving machinations – the rest of the Universe is an extension of my egocentric, self-serving reality. In other words, if I am a solegoist, I am the only thing that matters and everything around me functions to support, enlarge and stimulate my ego. To reinforce these beliefs, I will actively subjugate, manipulate or deny anything that does not conform to my egoistic fancies, preconceptions and will. After all, if someone or something appears to contradict my willful plans, they simply *cannot* exist. From one perspective, solegoism frames the underlying belief structures that encourage any selfish behavior, from a mildly controlling impulse to narcissistic personality disorder to homicidal rage. From another viewpoint, solegoism combines the sort of rationalist individualism in the writings of Ayn Rand with the I/Me/Mine orientation of a toddler's emerging ego. Sologoism embraces all the elements of solipsism, narcissism and egoism, then exaggerates them to the furthest extent possible.

So where does the commercialist piece fit in? It is my observation that commercialism as it has evolved in the U.S. promotes a particularly virulent meme of solegoism, and not in an accidental way. After all, to become continually self-absorbed and obsessed with our own wishes and urges creates very pliable and responsive consumers. To believe that pursuing and possessing every product advertised in the media will satisfy our needs and enhance our existence is extremely useful to the producers of those products. As the result of both focused coordination and tacit consent, the American public has been conditioned over decades to adopt a rigidly solegoistic worldview in service to the commercialist model. In one of the greatest sales jobs of the modern age, mass media has become a relentlessly persuasive fiend, enticing millions to abandon all ideals but one: that consuming a certain product, utilizing certain services or associating ourselves with a certain brand will make us healthy, happy and whole. “We identify with you...” is the pitch, “So you can identify with us!” And, over time, as consumers found themselves identifying more and more with the act of consumption and the products, services and brands they consumed, other identities were lost. Identities previously promoted within geographic regions, ethnic groups, religious communities, families, marriages and friendships...all of these began to falter and fail, divided against each other and subsumed by the solegoistic impulses of the individual consumer.

In the early phases of the industrial revolution, commercialism seems first to have created tribes devoted to its own ends. The tribe of this automobile manufacturer or that cosmetic company. The tribe of this or that fad. The tribe of this kind of premium ownership or that kind of elite experience. To belong to a particular commercialist tribe afforded real status in society, right down to the preference of cigarette, breakfast cereal, toy or clothing. And, perhaps because the U.S. is relatively young as a nation and has always struggled with its evolving self-concept, the rise of commercially viable identities were perfectly timed to balm our collective insecurities. Through unremitting advertising campaigns, Americans finally had something concrete and measurable to hold onto as their sense of self. Unfortunately, the preeminent values of these commercialist tribes were not centered around compassion,

cooperation, generosity, discovery, collaboration, innovation, or any other virtues venerated by our greatest philosophers, scientists and spiritual thinkers. They were instead centered around self-serving, rapacious consumption. So, one by one, all other tribal identities were subordinated to an individualistic, solipsistic conformism – a solegoistic identity that considered competitive consumption a requisite opportunity to expand and enhance the self. And thus, in a final stroke of marketing genius, the profits of industry were secured for generations to come.

The impact of such an identity shift on empathic connections quickly becomes clear. If I only care about myself, and care about you only to the extent that you can help fulfill my solegoistic worldview, there is little room for authentic empathy in our relationship. In a fully commercialized society, imitation empathy is just one more sales tool, another manipulative angle to commoditize the human spirit. In the absence of real empathy, an inflated sense of privilege and entitlement can now surge to the fore as unrepentant greed. Aggressive competitiveness, frantic hurry and alienation redouble their tenacity. In a parody of unitive awareness, there is no “other,” there is only the illusion of differentiation that facilitates beneficial transactions – that is, transactions that benefit *me*. Other people become agents of my ego, and commerce just lubricates the mechanisms of my will.

Therefore, when commercialist solegoism combines with the influences of technology and urbanity, we arrive at an explosive nexus of antagonistic factors. Here all opportunity and availability of empathy are quickly annihilated. What makes holiday shopping such a stressful experience in the U.S.? Why do people fight over the last toys on a retail shelf in the final days before Christmas? Why are there screaming matches over parking spaces during special sales or promotions? How could a crowd outside a Walmart end up shattering the store’s doors and trampling a Walmart employee to death? How has reckless indebtedness nearly destroyed the U.S. economy and the well-being of millions? Solegoism alone does not explain these behaviors. But when a solegoistic worldview is amplified with the impatience of

technological acceleration and the alienation of urban sprawl, a powerful new synergy takes over: a synergy of hostility and indifference.

An Unholy Synergy

Before we delve further into dire consequences of this anti-empathic nexus, it seems only fair to highlight some of the more positive aspects of modern culture. For instance, the diagnostic technologies used routinely in modern medicine verge on the miraculous by any measure. The cultural synthesis in big cities – the infinite variety and crosspollinations of music, art, food, language and so forth – has added invaluable new aesthetics and excitement to the human experience. The creativity, innovation and efficiency driven by the commercialization of industries old and new have provided inventive and compelling options for improving our lives. Technology has taken us to the surface of Mars, instantaneously connected disparate communities around the globe, allowed us to enjoy fresh fruit in the middle of winter, and unveiled quantum insights into the nature of the Universe. Urban populations host some of our most esteemed learning institutions, support our most cherished repositories of art and culture, and safeguard traditions and landmarks that define our history. Commercialism has created some of the greatest concentrations of wealth ever known to humankind, enabled some of the most far-reaching philanthropic efforts ever witnessed, and improved the standard of living for millions at or near the top of the commercialist food chain. So...much good has come of our modern nexus as well.

Is it possible to retain these wonderful benefits without the loss of empathy? I believe we can to some degree, but unless we change direction – unless we shift our consciousness as individuals and as a cultural whole – our empathic connections will deteriorate as technology, urbanization and commercialism continue to interact, marching us ever onward. At the root of this steady deterioration is a persistent sort of hostile imprisonment. When we are

indifferent to each other's plights, when we are impatient to get our needs and wants met, when we end up competing with each other for limited resources, when we have forgotten what it means to belong to a community and revert to our earliest egoistic impulses, then aggression, mistrust and a self-protective hardening of heart become our default interpersonal modes. Further, there is little opportunity to escape from the corralling of consciousness that modern influences impose. We have no time to think for ourselves, to expand our awareness, to encourage intuition or to fully tune into the present. We are too overwhelmed with the constant stream of stimulation, information and invitation; too preoccupied with to-dos and to-haves.

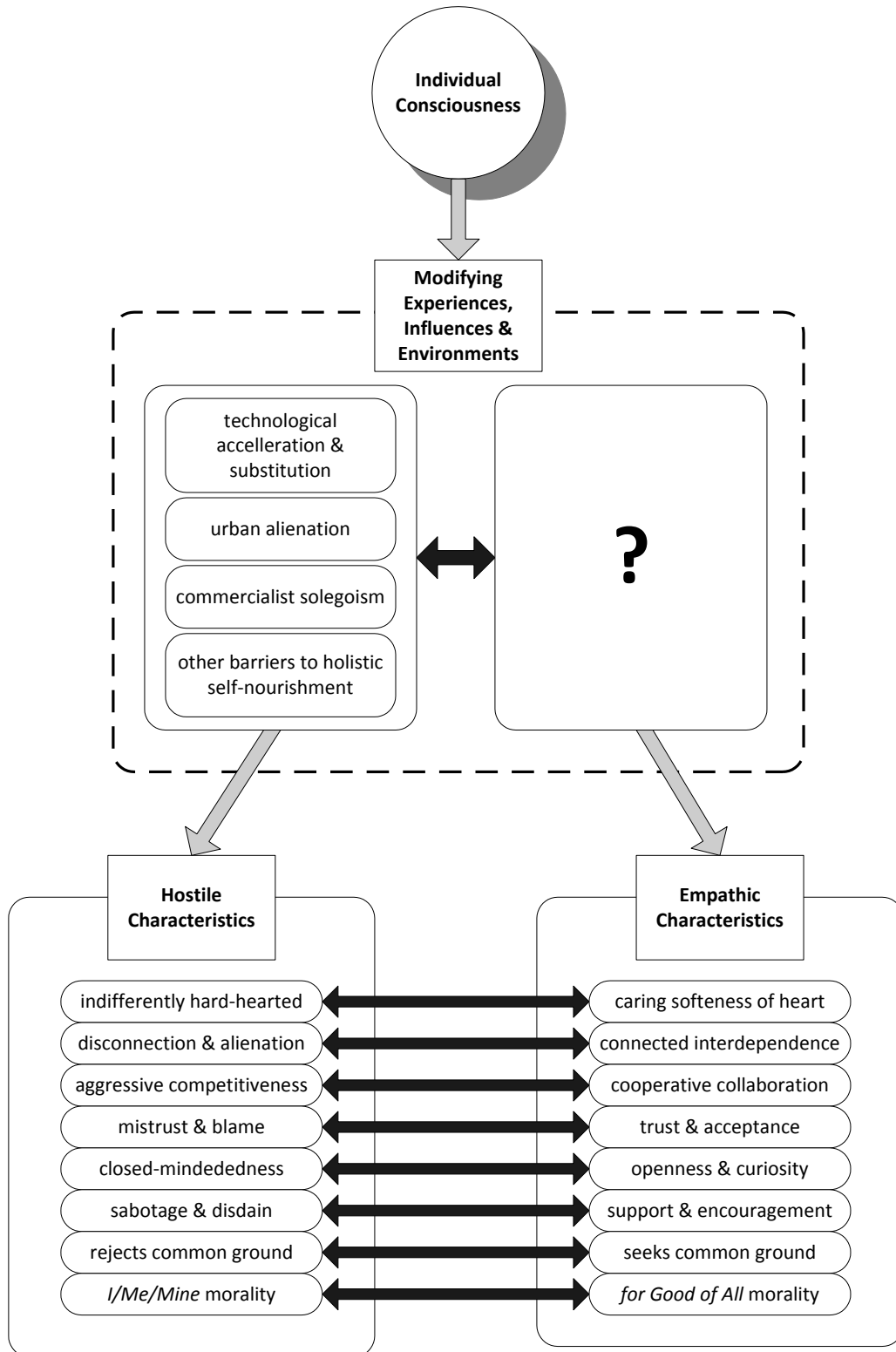
Clearly, this nexus isn't the sole reason for all maladies unique to modern culture, but it likely bears a lion's share of the responsibility. Without it, would U.S. prison populations be growing as quickly as they are? Would there be so much violence on our city streets and within our families? Would poisons and petrochemicals decimate so much wildlife or sicken so many people? Would type 2 diabetes be an epidemic in the U.S.? Would cancer be so prevalent? Would Wall Street recklessness be so ubiquitous or destructive? Would so many young people in the U.S. experiment with drugs, try to have babies or drop out of school at an early age? Would crack cocaine and methamphetamines use be so widespread? Would domesticated livestock have become so unhealthy? Would climate change be occurring as quickly?

Although we may not be able to remedy these challenges overnight, I believe there is a simple and straightforward solution to begin the healing, and that is to hold empathy in higher esteem. If we reconstitute empathy as our primary mode of interaction across all strata of society, we can begin to mitigate these negative influences and prevent future escalation. It's a simple matter of propagation. Just as fear, aggression, alienation and hatred have replicated across families, communities and society at large under an unholy nexus, so to patience, acceptance, encouragement and compassion can multiply once a strong empathic pattern is

established through individual practice and example. The amplification begins with a few personal choices to prioritize empathy – first in our interior awareness, and then in our interpersonal exchanges. All we require to create this path are a little openness, trust, vulnerability and softness of heart. Once we acknowledge our desire for connection on a felt level – for the purpose of friendship, community and societal cohesion – we can provide healthy opportunities for that connection each and every day. In this way, with compassionate intention, attention and follow-through, we can realign the progress of human civilization.

Of course, when hostility and indifference reign in our hearts and lives, empathy can seem like an untenable ideal. We can feel trapped in a downward, negative spiral that perpetually reinforces itself. Something is required to interrupt that cycle so that we can at least envision a way out – we need a roadmap that considers every facet of our lives where disruptions to empathy have taken root. To illustrate this contrast, consider the following chart.

Figure 1: Hostility vs. Empathy



Genuine empathy and the hostile synergies of the modern era cannot peacefully coexist. The tension between these orientations play tug-of-war with our mind, body, heart, spirit and soul, constantly vying for dominance. Thankfully, there is a way out of this struggle. We need not be enslaved to the oppressive patterns that technology, urbanization and commercialism have introduced. By approaching our own well-being holistically and practicing a few simple disciplines, we can reawaken empathy as our primary tool for connecting with ourselves and the world around us. And by revitalizing our empathic connections, we will generate a natural counterbalance to the influences that undermine compassionate effort. By committing to this course, we can in fact sustain limitless reservoirs of authentic kindness and generous spirit, as well as the insight to express these effectively and wisely. We all have the opportunity and resources to make this conscious shift in our mode of being and interaction; we just need a reminder of our own compassionate potential.

AN INTEGRAL SOLUTION

How can we best reignite empathy as part of our emotional intelligence? There is likely more than one answer to this question, but I will offer what I have observed in the lives of my *Integral Lifework* clients and students, and as the result of my own integral practice.

At first, it may seem tempting to address only the symptoms, rather than the underlying cause. For instance, we could resist the adoption of new technologies or free ourselves from dependence on certain types of technology. We could refuse to own a television or ever use a computer. We could carry around cell phone signal disruptors. We could grow our own food or cook all of our own meals. We could live “off of the grid.” And, in the same spirit of rationalist individualism that led to so many of our modern day troubles, these would indeed be helpful – *but only to us as individuals*. To exit the larger cultural maelstrom might feel liberating, but it is ultimately self-serving. Technology will, after all, still thrive unabated in a

society at large that is hungry for newer, faster and better. We may be left behind, but technology will not.

Well then, what about combating urbanization through better city planning and more rigorous regulation? For instance, we could carefully restrict zoning, or protect more natural habitat, or penalize overzealous developers. Alas, the pressures that converge on cities are much greater than a few difficult-to-enforce laws. With exponential population growth on the one hand, and on the other a constant flood of poor or oppressed populations into more affluent and free societies, any top-down approach to controlling urbanization is bound to falter in the long run. Highly motivated populations have a tendency to circumvent any and all obstacles to their own perceived betterment. Relying on the rule of law alone to stem this tide only burdens court systems already straining under their current loads. And in terms of controlling population growth itself, attempts to persuade people not to reproduce has, historically, fallen on deaf ears in all but the most totalitarian societies.

What about changing our economic system, or reigning in corporate influence, or better protecting consumers? If we could just keep politician's hands out of corporate coffers, corporate lobbyists out of Washington D.C., and legislation drafted by corporations out of Congress. If we could just segregate commercial enterprise from civil governance the same way we separate church and state. If we could just aggressively punish the companies who overreach in their pursuit of profit, who knowingly harm consumers, who destroy the environment, who treat employees like disposable assets. If we could just restrict the kind of advertising that creates a solegoistic consumer identity. But however satisfying this vision of corporate accountability may be, the beneficiaries of our economic system have many resources in their thrall. Any corrective efforts face huge concentrations of wealth and its concomitant influence, as well as vast populations of obedient consumers who have no desire to change a comfortable status quo. Although these efforts are necessary and noble, they alone cannot contain the profit motive's degradation of empathy.

In other words, we cannot rely solely upon individualistic, legalistic, political or economic remedies to elevate empathy's valuation in society. We cannot expect systems, institutions or individuals long conditioned to suppress empathy to suddenly embrace it. We cannot force people to accept empathy as their primary mode of being. Of course, it may be difficult for a caring person to understand why the current state of affairs goes seemingly unquestioned by the masses, or why passionate pleas for change likewise go unheeded. But the current reality is that no matter how devastating the impact of technological, urban and commercialist influences, there is seldom any evidence that can sway a human heart that has been conditioned *not to care*. It is extremely challenging to appeal to the better nature of hostility and indifference, or for someone trapped in that prison to find a way out without help. This is how slavery happens. How child abuse happens. How rape, torture and other gruesome acts of violence happen. This is how genocide happens. And this is how modern society will eventually unravel entirely if we cannot affect positive change.

How, then, can we reconstitute caring? How do we approach the human heart as ground zero for an empathic revolution? Starting with our own lives, we can and must make room to care for our own being. We can create spacious solitude that resists the tidal pull of modern culture. We can unfetter our mind, heart and spirit so that empathy percolates to the surface. We can attenuate the insistence of technology, the noisy urgency of city life and the intrusive persuasions of advertising until our whole consciousness rests in silence. We can slow down until we are still, and in that stillness pay attention to all those neglected facets of self yearning for affection. Spaciousness, silence, stillness. These are the building blocks of a grassroots revolution, a new flowering of empathy. But how do we invoke these conditions?

In order to connect empathetically with the world around us, we must first develop a strong empathic connection with different aspects of our own inner life. As we patiently observe and acknowledge our own sensations, desires and musings, we begin to understand, empathize

and identify with ourselves as a whole person. We relax into who we really are. Where does my mind roam when left to its own devices? What messages is my body trying to send me? What feelings arise in me when I completely let go? What does my spirit yearn for? As we learn to listen to different facets of self from that place of spacious stillness, we begin to experience our self more fully. And that multidimensional awareness – that brimming experience of self – is what enables and informs our ability to empathize. As we explore and honor our mind, body, heart and spirit, we begin a journey of holistic self-nourishment. And it is this journey that offers clear insights into how interconnected we are with others and how all beings are more alike than different. It shows us the importance of relationship – with ourselves, with other people, with Nature, with the ground of being. Once we recognize our interdependence with All that Is, empathy becomes an effortless extension of that recognition.

In the language of *Integral Lifework*, the antagonistic factors we have discussed so far are considered barriers to holistic nourishment. They prevent us from accessing one or more dimensions of self, leading to imbalance and depletion. When we lack complete nourishment, we are simply unable to tolerate certain kinds of connection or generate certain types of experience. If we are emotionally exhausted, it is difficult to care about anything even though we may know intellectually that we should care. If we are physically malnourished, we will not have the strength or endurance to carry our own burdens, let alone offer help to someone else. If we have already expended all of our mental energies just to make it through the day, how can we listen attentively to the challenges of others? This same principle applies to all thirteen dimensions of integral self-care, and so we must become intimately aware of how those dimensions are shaped and supported before we can confidently extend our empathy beyond the boundaries of self. To appreciate what holistic nourishment looks like, let's quickly review those thirteen dimensions:

- **Healthy Body.** Sustaining and strengthening our physical being through conscious patterns of diet, exercise, sleep and other key factors uniquely suited to who we are.
- **Playful Heart.** Maintaining healthy emotional expression and connection with our inner life, and engaging in regular playfulness and creative self-expression from day to day.
- **Supportive Community.** Inviting love and acceptance into our lives, both in what we receive from others, how loving and accepting we are of others, and how actively we participate in our community.
- **Expanding Mind.** Building, broadening and routinely stimulating our knowledge, understanding and mental capacities and abilities.
- **Fulfilling Purpose.** Discovering and actuating a satisfying life-purpose that is perfectly matched to our authentic self, and which supports the focus, strength and healthy expression of our personal will.
- **Spiritual Ground.** Establishing and increasing our connection and interaction with the ground of being – described in different traditions as the fundamental essence, spiritual energy or Divine nature of reality – and translating that deepening connection into a spiritually authentic life.
- **Restorative History.** Acknowledging, honoring and, when necessary, reprocessing all the experiences of our lives – whether remembered or forgotten, integrated or rejected – that have contributed to our current state of being; every significant relationship, trauma, milestone, accomplishment, perception or influence that has led us to the present moment.

- **Pleasurable Legacy.** Creating and sustaining new life, pleasurable experiences that are shared, and an enduring and positive impression on our world, while at the same time maintaining a sense of safety and stability for ourselves and those we love.
- **Flexible Processing Space.** Being able to regularly and effortlessly transition through different modes of perception and processing, with each centered in different facets of our being – our heart, mind, body, spirit and soul – so that we fully nourish those facets and create transparent access to the insights, wisdom and discernment each has to offer.
- **Empowered Self-Concept.** Tuning our self-awareness, self-worth and self-efficacy toward the most realistic, compassionate and supportive range of function, so that we both strengthen our nurturing capacity in all other nourishment centers, and continually address any perceived barriers that arise.
- **Satisfying Sexuality.** Exploring the nature of our own sexuality – through the dynamics of our sexual relationships and our expectations of intimacy – in order to clarify and communicate our needs and desires and arrive at fulfilling nourishment for ourselves and those with whom we sexually engage.
- **Affirming Integrity.** Consciously aligning the unfolding essence of our being with our thoughts, feelings, words and actions, so that *how* we are from moment to moment authentically reflects *who* we are in our innermost depths.
- **Artful Will.** Entering the calm, quiescent flow of our most creative, affirming and compassionate intentions; actualizing what we envision and cherish in our heart-of-hearts so that life, laughter, love and liberty thrive for our being, ultimately amplifying the good of All in everything we do.

As we nurture ourselves across all of these dimensions in a balanced way, a fresh synergy takes shape that softens all vestiges of hostility and frees us from the cage of modern culture. *Integral Lifework* is grounded in the simple idea that when we set our intention to enliven compassion in ourselves and work patiently for the greater good of everyone and everything through multidimensional nourishment, a miraculous energy suffuses everything we do. The energy of authentic love. And as that energy permeates the supportive disciplines we actuate, it cascades across every aspect of our existence. We become agents of compassionate affection in ever-widening arenas of action and interaction. In all of our relationships, we affect mutual exchanges that depend upon skillful empathy and enlarge our empathic capacity. Because we have learned to fully inhabit our own shoes by attending to our whole well-being, we can confidently and serenely step out of those shoes to try on someone else's.

Within each of the thirteen nourishment dimensions in *Integral Lifework*, there are also specific practices that bolster our defense against the unholy synergy of modern influences. For example, harmonizing with the rhythms of Nature or spending time communing with her (facets of Authentic Spirit and Flexible Processing Space dimensions) both require practical insulation and separation from urban environments, dense populations and technological dependencies for periods of time. As we address the Affirming Integrity or Fulfilling Purpose nourishment centers, our attachment to a consumerist identity and habit will naturally slough away over time. And as much as Western culture has attempted to commoditize and market nourishment in certain dimensions – Playful Heart, Healthy Body and Supportive Community have been high on the commodities list – *Integral Lifework* shifts our focus from external fulfillment to internal fulfillment, supplanting dependence on consumables with self-reliance and healthy interdependence. In fact, the nourishment centers of Empowered Self-Concept and Restorative History are dedicated primarily to this self-reliant outcome. It could even be said that self-governed directedness of effort infuses all viable integral practice, regardless of what nourishment centers are being targeted.

There is of course always the danger that *Integral Lifework* could become yet another avenue to external dependence – yet another consumable solution – despite its built-in bulwarks. That is why identifying the antagonists of empathy is so important, and why consciously constructing a strategy to overcome them has a prominent place as part of any advanced integral discipline. Political activism, living simply, reducing our carbon footprint, growing food sustainably, advocating corporate accountability, protecting consumers and a host of other efforts to evolve our society will always be worthwhile. But their ultimate effectiveness and true departure from destructive modes of the past will depend on our own interior work. We must learn how to attend to our innermost voices and take responsibility for our own well-being. We must initiate compassionate relationship with every aspect of self first and foremost, because whatever we create within will be reflected in our efforts and relationships without. Before we can hope to secure a global celebration of kindness and healing, we must consciously begin an adventure into interior awareness and a carefully considered personal wholeness. An adventure down the road to empathy.

