



FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Power of Empathy

Dear Friends,

It was an unlikely friendship forged over hours of playing Scrabble and Monopoly. Hannah (“Mrs. Newman”) was eighty-four. I was eleven. My mother was the director of social work and director of a senior residential home in Ocean Grove where I would spend my after-school hours visiting residents and playing Scrabble. Looking back, the gift I received from Hannah and the other residents (in addition to a pretty mean Scrabble game — they NEVER let me win, I had to earn it!) was the gift of empathy. Even at eleven-years-old, these folks became my friends and our lives held meaning for one another.

As of this writing, the death toll from COVID-19 has surpassed 200,000 Americans and more than 975,000 worldwide. The numbers have become so staggering that I am afraid many have become numb to their immensity. In a sobering article in *The Atlantic* entitled “A Failure of Empathy Led to 200,000 Deaths. It Has Deep Roots,” Olga Khazan posits that ageism has played a significant role in the failure of will to implement health measures that could protect others.



More specifically, she wonders whether a lack of collective empathy, across the board but particularly in relation to older adults, has contributed to the astonishing vastness of this pandemic. She asks the question, “Is our national empathy — our care and love and concern for one another — at such a low level that we are not truly feeling, in our bones, in our hearts, and in our souls, the magnitude of the loss?” The disturbing lack of empathy can become a threat to the very fabric of our culture. As political philosopher Hannah Arendt observes, “the death of human empathy is one of the earliest and most telling signs of a culture about to fall into barbarism.”

Princeton University psychologist Susan Fiske argues that even older adults themselves do not feel as much empathy towards their peers who are suffering in this pandemic because older adults typically do not see themselves as such. “The ‘old’” Dr. Fiske says, “are always just a little bit older than ourselves.” As a result, older adults tend to downplay their vulnerability and see the risks as “someone else’s concern.”

Fiske further goes on to indicate that African American and Native American communities counter this prevailing trend because of the high value placed on the wisdom and generativity of the elders in those communities. There is much that can be learned from these communities including the value of wisdom and the power of empathy.

As we approach this season of gratitude, I can’t help but remember Hannah Newman and lessons learned around the Scrabble board about the power of empathy. In an age when civil discourse is seriously strained and even a life-threatening virus has been politicized, my deep hope is for a community whose lives hold meaning for one another, a community that understands the depth of loss we have experienced even if it has not been felt personally. In the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “to be truly human is to know that you are bound up with others in the bundle of life.”

All the Best,
Drew A. Dyson, PhD
Executive Director