



The White Man's Tongue

Healthy empathy is rooted in a healthy sense of self.

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“It doesn’t require many words to speak the truth.”

— Chief Joseph

Vicarious Introspection

This piece is about truth and empathy.

I’m told empathy is vicarious introspection, an experience of yourself that arises through your consideration of someone else’s experience. This leaves room for both similar and dissimilar empathy, where similar empathy means you feel similar to how another person feels and dissimilar empathy means you feel something different. Both feelings would be triggered by considering the same experience of another person. But how do you really know what the other person feels? It’s reasonable to expect there is always a little of both happening at the same time.

Heinz Kohut was a Freudian analyst. I watched a longer version of his last presentation on empathy. Here's an [excerpt from that video](#) in which he says a little about empathy. Kohut is famous for making simple things complicated. He's very sincere; I can make nothing of what he says.

"Introspection and empathy should be looked at as an informer of appropriate action."

— **Heinz Kohut**

If that was all there was to empathy, then we could understand it in terms of what it makes you do. That's partly helpful, but it leaves a lot on the table. There is a fundamental part of empathy that's rooted in a shared sense of conflict, a lack of clear, appropriate action. There's a part of empathy that remains as thought and feeling and does not act.

I will leave these psychologists and psychiatrists to their own imbroglio. I have little sympathy for them. (Sympathy: the feeling that another person deserves your attention.) I think empathy is fundamental and cannot be left in the form of impenetrable concepts. To get there we have to talk about our process of being reflective. Consider these two concepts that pertain to self-awareness.

Metacognition is an awareness of your thought processes and the patterns behind them that allows you to become aware that thoughts and feelings are separate from who you feel yourself to be. As a result, you recognize that **you are more than your thoughts and feelings**.

Dissociation is an awareness of your thought processes and the patterns behind them that allows you to become aware that you feel yourself defined by thoughts and feelings that are different from who you feel yourself to be. As a result, **there is more than one of you**.



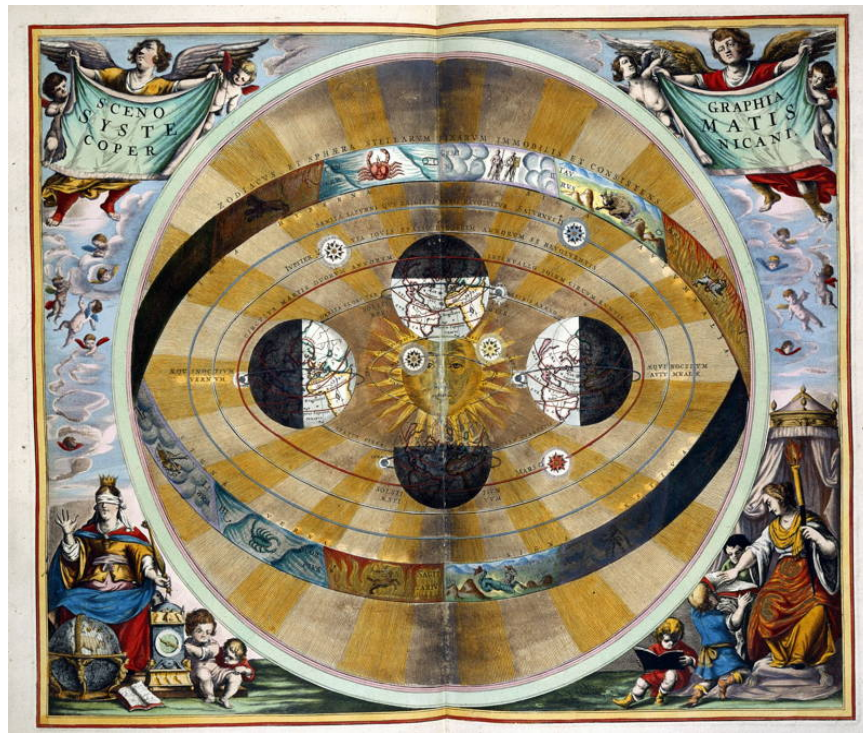
Learning

Learning is life and is just as mysterious. Learning is change, growth, and evolution and is not programmed, mechanical, or reductive. All sustained change is some kind of learning and even temporary change is learning though it's lost.

The fundamental notion of determinism is that there is one predictable way forward. As long as things are following that predictable way forward there is no learning. Changes of that sort are programmed. They are baked in the cake. That may look like change, but it isn't. It's just a new perspective on what was already there.

In empathy there is a disruption, a branching of paths, a dissonance between your previous experience and the other person's experience that you're considering now.

You cannot experience exactly what another person experiences, there is always a difference. An essential part of empathy is combining the feelings of similarity and difference. That's where unpredictable things happen. Part of empathy depends on what you experience, and part of it depends on how you experience yourself.



Truth

In the stereotyped potboiler Western the Indian proclaims, “White Man speaks with forked tongue.” I saw these Western movies as a kid and I always wondered about this. It was obviously a Hollywood device, but there was something to it. On the one hand it was obvious because enemies always lie to each other and the losing side always feels cheated. On the other hand there was something more to it. It seemed like more than just a complaint.

It’s been said that the western self is embedded in a culture of narcissism, and Kohut proposed that this was a coping strategy for our culture’s effect of driving down our self-esteem. We become narcissistic and inflate our self-importance because we carry a degraded sense of ourselves. We see this in the worship of celebrities, people we see as smart, powerful, or attractive, and in our craving for money.

A drowning person will climb onto anything that floats, and a narcissistic person will take advantage of anything that provides them with advantage including their own morality. After all, morality rests on what feels right, and, if you don’t feel right, then the moral choice won’t feel right either. Narcissism weighs morality toward what satisfies your personal need, and for the average Westerner that is whatever makes them feel more secure.

As a culture, I don’t think we Westerners know what healthy self-esteem feels like. I don’t think we have a balanced sense of truth. This does something to the scales of justice and we see that everywhere and **it’s** in our face. The fundamental disrespect our society shows for individuals is rooted in the self-respect that we don’t have for ourselves.

We look outward to compensate, toward our social profile and as much authority as we can accumulate. We look to authority and institutions to give us “a little more porridge,” in the words of Charles Dickens, and our morality is skewed toward our *paterfamilias*, the good father, god, society, and the government.

We speak to each other not as equals, but as contestants. We speak to foreigners as threats, runts of the litter, and those who are not entitled.

Of course, we cannot admit this to ourselves because that would undermine the value of what we strive for. You cannot lust after wealth at the same time that you recognize the poisonous effect of money. This is what makes narcissism a mental dysfunction: you cannot correct it so long as you are controlled by it.

Westerners hold out our hands to engage with the world, to be shepherds of our environment, and to build a sustainable culture, but our fists are closed. We can't see things balanced because we're imbalanced. Even if you feel balanced—and how would you know if you were—you don't live in a balanced culture.

The playing field is not level. You maintain your sense of truth by maintaining your sense of identity which, for the White Man, is always slipping. We're always reaching for more because we cannot find balance no matter how much we have.

Consider this: my description does not describe you. You know that if you just had a little more, then you would have enough. You know that your needs are reasonable and that if you got what you needed, you wouldn't take more. You know this because it's happened before. You had what you needed on occasion, but it didn't last because something took it away.

To overcome narcissism in yourself you must pass through a crisis of dissociation. You must find another you, and grow that you to a state that is strong enough to form an identity, and then disengage from the person you used to be. You cannot simply supply what's missing because the narcissistic self cannot hold it.

Because no one wants to disable a part of themselves, at least not while they still believe in themselves, the force to change oneself often originates from outside. It creates conflict that you either fight against or internalize as disease or dysfunction. When circumstances conspire to kill the narcissistic it becomes a crisis.



Empathy

I'm heading toward empathy, which is what this is all about. I want a program for becoming more empathic, but something is in the way. This is not simply a puzzle with a clean solution, or a detective story in which we follow the clues. In this story we are the detective and we are the culprit, and we're constantly running away from the clues.

I've not yet encountered a program for developing empathy that's worth a damn. I've encountered a few cognitive behavioral prescriptions that provide instructions for how to appear more empathic. This happy family whitewash is the staple of office etiquette and management training with the goal of making people more productive.

Psychologists talk about the need for a deeper feeling of connection with ourselves. Social reformers talk about our need to find a deeper connection with each other. Environmentalists talk about our need for a deeper connection with the earth. The need is everywhere and it's obvious, so why doesn't it happen?

It doesn't happen because we can't let it happen. We are not at liberty to become more empathic, we protect ourselves. This is another meme of Western culture, the meme of the savage unconscious alien or monster motivated by no reason than to destroy us. Depending on the story, this force is portrayed as separated, attached, or an internal part of us.

We project this self-destructive part onto an external threat and marshal our forces in order to defeat it. When it's attached to us, we work to expose and then remove the spy or parasite. But when it's an internal part of us it's insanity, and we flee.

The White Man speaks with a forked tongue because the White culture has compromised our loyalty. We love our culture like a traumatized child loves his or her abusive parent. It's the only one we know. Whatever we say to the outsider, we have a different story for ourselves. In a compromised culture we take it for granted that everyone is always looking out for number one. There is not enough of the essentials to go around, and the first essential that's at auction is truth.

The forked tongue is healed by shared truth which is also the foundation for empathy. The forked tongue separates factions fighting for what they can't get enough of, whether that be self-respect, political power, or natural resources.

We could build an empathy training program on how to listen and commiserate, but if our presence is unbalanced or preoccupied, then our empathy will be too. The first order of business is to strengthen our personality so that it is strong enough to imagine an equal and collaborative role. To collaborate as equals we need the ability to mirror in a balanced way, which requires a fairly intact self that is not narcissistic.

This seems impossible, but that's not acceptable. I will propose that we try to achieve this incrementally by becoming more metacognitive and more dissociated. By becoming more aware and detached, empathy and self-confidence can inform each other. If we can become more aware of what we lack in understanding others, we can see what we lack in ourselves.

I believe the key is imagination in the same way that imagination is the key to learning. My rule number 7 in [*Becoming Supergenius*](#) is, "measure how well you learn not by what you can remember, but by what you can imagine." There must be a way to imagine empathy.

"Empathy is not merely the basic principle of artistic creation. It is also the only path by which one can reach the truth about life and society."

— **Kafū Nagai, author**

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