

LL19-Empathy Is a Lost Virtue

I'm Alvean Lyons,
and I'm Doug Weiss and welcome to Love Life

Douglas, we have a really interesting question this week that really speaks in our current society about where many people find themselves and specifically this question is about empathy as a lost virtue. The question is, in our world today how has our preoccupation with ourselves made it harder for us to create lasting and real relationships? What do you think?

Well this is a topic I've been thinking a lot about lately, because I, like many people have watched a broad decline. I'm not saying something here I think anyone would really debate about the civility with which we treat each other. But there is a particular form of it that's almost monomaniacal if you take it to an extreme but even in everyday life. I see things that happen, and it's kind of a subtle form: it's the person who's so busy texting or talking on the phone that they will keep people waiting in a line at the grocery store. The other day I was at the gym and I was working out and was using a set of weights and I was doing a rotation going through three different exercises. Somebody sat down at the machine that I had been using and started using it and when they were done they packed it all up as if I had not been using it. I'm sure that if I had said something to this individual he probably would have said oh gee sorry, but it was in such stark contrast because at the same time in that very same session somebody had come over to me and said are you using this machine? And I said I am, I've got two more sets but if you'd like to work in with me we can do that which we did and it was it was just perfectly fine. So some people seem to have a kind of radar that allows them to be sensitive to and aware of people around them, and other people seemwell their radar doesn't seem to be functioning as well. I think it starts with the whole question of this the subject of empathy to feel for someone else means you first have to even be aware of them. You have to be able to put yourself in their place, and I do think that we live in a time where we are much more preoccupied with what I think what I feel what I want and that is a lot of I going and not much you or we.

To emphasize one's ego is a constructive thing, a healthy thing, but this strikes me as something which is not. I see it more and more these days, and I'm not the

only one. Many people I know have made a comment about their sense that things have changed. There is a famous book called *Bowling Alone* by a Harvard professor, that takes its title from the idea that we've lost that kind of collective societal activity and with that our sense of reciprocity that comes from being part of a group.

This is an interesting topic and certainly when it comes to relationships I guess I'm stunned because I cannot see how one can be in relationship with anyone much less (not to get off on my pet subject here, but in relationship with God) without feeling empathy,..... the ability to connect to one with another beyond oneself and then, as to the listener who sent us the question, I was referring to at the next level, then the effect that has on our ability to create real relationship with anybody else..... lasting relationship for that matter which is really speaking to the coming out of the I that you were referencing previously. To even consider the possibility of an us or a we when first I can't see you. Then there is little likelihood of me being able to feel anything associated with you. In an environment that we are in right now..... we are, my generation and younger in particular are very connected via social media, so this whole virtual world that is consumed with the image that I put up, and how many people like my image, how many people worship me through these affirmations of likes and loves and clicks and shares and all of these things the ultimate superficiality of what it means to connect with another individual and how quickly you see things like oh I love you, you're so amazing, you're such a great person, you're so fabulous and none of these people really know each other. All of this is completely contrived. You took a thousand pictures before you posted the one that we finally saw, none of this stuff is organic in any form or fashion. And yet, we believe this synthetic feedback that says that somehow we're worthy of something as a byproduct of these affirmations or not worthy of something as a byproduct of the deafening silence, by not getting those affirmations. Then we try to engage in real relationships with people where we now are looking for them to make us feel the way these virtual things made us feel. You have a series of these inorganic and sick synthetic connections that really are void of empathy and we don't make real investment in one another. We aren't seeing and feeling somebody else in any real way. So, to the invisibility that you were speaking of before, when I'm so consumed with myself it is virtually impossible to even acknowledge the presence and then secondarily the feelings of somebody else.

I've been thinking about this question and I'm going to make a statement and see what your reaction is to it. I've come to the tentative conclusion that empathy is learned, it is not innate. That we don't just come into this world with a sensitivity to others. That in fact we come into this world with self-awareness or we grow into self-awareness but to learn to see through someone else's eyes, to feel or at least imagine what they're going through, what they're experiencing is something that we have to learn. So that's my assertion and my question to you is do you believe that's true.... I'm not saying that you do, but if you do, how do you cultivate empathy, how do you teach people to be empathetic?

That's such an interesting proposition, because I'm now thinking about all of the young people, the babies, the small children turning into young children, turning into teenagers, turning into adults. All that I have watched over the years, and I actually think that there may be some merit to your assertion, because when I think about the little people in my life and watching them take things from others and not care about it. And what my need is right now is the most important need and when I drop this on you or hit you with that I'm fine and who cares about you . That it is the adults very often who are stopping to say Hey be nice, you stepped on such and such, say that you're sorry. You poked the dog, be gentle. Each of those things are very much taught, so I would actually have to agree with you that I cannot think of a single incident or experience in which I have seen empathy shown that was completely organic for a child. I can't think of one.

I was talking to a colleague not that long ago who has a young daughter and she came home from school upset, because she had been the victim, if one could be a victim as a five year old. She had been playing with something and another little girl came over and took it away from her and behaved badly. And she brought it up at the dinner table and mom and dad said Well how do you feel? And she was angry as you would expect her to be. And they said well why do you think this little girl did that? And it kind of stopped her dead in her tracks, because she in fact had not thought about why this little girl did that. She kind of rehearsed out loud various reasons why perhaps this little girl might have done that, and interestingly none of them were because she was a bad person. Only adults do that. We use labels with each other, but she didn't. She didn't have a label so she tried to find some other explanation. I found this interesting because what it said to me is that the capacity for empathy exists in us but it needs a reaction, it needs

some external impetus. So when we're having vigorous debates about any topic between people and they are deeply charged and emotional, how do you stop that long enough to say to both parties why do you think the other person feels so strongly? Even if you don't agree with them why do you think what they do? What is it about their life experience, what is it about what's happened to them that's brought them to that perspective? if we can't get to that root issue then all we're going to do is hurl ideology at each other and that's the death of empathy

Oh absolutely, and quite frankly as we talk about this in layers what we're doing out there we're doing in here. It becomes the culture of our intimate relationships that I cannot see beyond myself to be able to connect with what you may be going through and experiencing. So all of these are sort of reflecting each other. What we're doing at home is affecting what's going on out there, what's going on out there is affecting what we're doing at home, and we're modeling all of that for generations coming behind us. So the quality of relationships, the quality of relationship itself is negatively impacted by that.

I had the experience and I blogged about watching a very pious individual do something very despicable, and it was so bad that it actually cost someone their job. It was unfair, it was wrong, it was gossip mongering of the highest order it was based on absolute fabrication, but sometimes things get a life of their own. In the end, my friend decided to leave his employment rather than endure what was happening. He took the high road here, he didn't have to but he's a man of principle. And it came out that the things that were being said were absolutely untrue. I have to tell you I was pretty mad, but a friend said to me you need to forgive him, you need to let go, and, you need to pray for this man. For me that was a stretch. Maybe I could forgive him, I'm not sure about praying for him I'm not going to go out and have a cup of coffee with this guy right, but I did pray on it because she encouraged me to. And I thought about in the course of praying and it brought me around to thinking about whether had ever done something advertently or inadvertently to cause somebody pain, and the answer was yes I have. There was no question about it. So who am I to sit in judgment? I've walked in his shoes. And the more I thought about that the more I had to step back and say, look we're never going to be fast friends. It's not my place to forgive you, God's already forgiven him as he's forgiven me all the things I've done. He's got to live with what he did and maybe that will have importance in his life maybe it won't I don't know, but what I can do is to have empathy. I can try to

understand why he did that and at the very least there had to have been some things that happened in his life that brought him to that, that caused him to feel that the only way he could feel good was by making somebody else feel bad. We have to be careful as human beings that we don't judge others by their actions but expect people to judge us with gracious intention and empathy. That is what informs our ability to connect with another person and to see the world through their eyes.

That's love life. Another episode

We want to thank you for listening to love life, we want to thank Todd Washburn our recording engineer, Barbara Hamm Lee our producer. We hope you'll join us again next week for another episode.