

The Age of Outrospection by Jonny Miller

Imagine for a moment that you are reading or listening to a story so intensely that you forget yourself and step into the shoes of the storyteller. You see what they saw, hear what they heard, and feel what they felt. These moments are rare, yet when they happen it is as if we have been transported into their world and we are able to see through their eyes. It is a powerful, almost magical feeling. One that is a privilege.

Proust is talking about adventurous empathy. Seeking out new perspectives on the world and 'possessing other eyes' - or as Kathryn Scholz said, 'seeing the world as it isn't'. Although we would be the first to admit to our shamelessly optimistic and somewhat naive approach both to life and to building Maptia, we firmly believe that:

More than any other time in history, there is a vast and remarkable potential to spread vivid, thoughtful, and imaginative stories via the unfathomably dense communication network known as the Internet.

Many of the seven billion people on the planet now have the potential to share their own 'eyes on the world' and share their own unique perspectives and experiences with those who have not perhaps had the same opportunities. The ability to do this is a privilege and we should treat it as such - we must do our best to craft each story we share with as much care, wisdom and thought as we can muster.

Just as importantly, each of us also has the opportunity to cultivate our own global sense of adventurous empathy by taking the time to read, understand and appreciate other people's stories from all over the world. Philosopher Roman Krznaric refers to this as 'Outrospection'.

What exactly is 'Outrospection'?

In his talk, which has been delightfully animated by the RSA, Roman asserts that the process of 'experiential outrospection' requires that we ditch the self-centred 'self-help' guides and manuals on how to become rich and successful and that instead we seek to understand life through the eyes of others, fostering an adventurous curiosity for other lives and places beyond our own experience.

When travelling for example, instead of asking the usual question 'where should I go next?', Roman suggests that we might instead ask 'whose shoes can I stand in next?' - embarking on journeys into the lives of strangers. Roman also mentions the difference between empathy and pity:

"If you see a homeless person living under a bridge you may feel sorry for him and give him some money as you pass by. That is pity or sympathy, not empathy. If, on the other hand, you make an effort to look at the world through his eyes, to consider what life is really like for him, and perhaps have a conversation that transforms him from a faceless stranger into a unique individual, then you are empathising."

— Roman Krznaric

In the video above, Roman says that the 'empathetic gap' that exists in the world today is two-fold:

Firstly, we are not empathising with people across countries. For instance, those in India who are already suffering from floods most likely caused by global warming.

Secondly, that we are failing to empathise through time to future generations.

Roman has some radical suggestions for how we might overcome this gap. Our favourite is his idea of building 'Empathy Museums' in every city - experiential and conversational public spaces, full of human libraries where you might be able to borrow people for in-depth conversations. For instance, you could walk into a room with former Vietnamese sweatshop worker who would teach you how to make a T-shirt similar to the one you are likely wearing and talk to you about their life. And for many thousands of years, stories have been the way humans have shared empathy, fostered understanding of the world around us, and taught common values.

“ I believe empathy is the most essential quality of civilization. ”

— Roger Ebert

The Evolution of Our Concentric Circles of Empathy

Stepping back in time to the 18th century, Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote about his concept for 'concentric circles of empathy' - a wonderfully visual metaphor for understanding how empathy functions. Our illustrating intern Ella has drawn it for you below.

Hume argued that our sense of empathy towards others tends to diminish as we go further from the centre of this circle. As we move away from our immediate family all the way to someone on the other side of the world, to whom you have no ties.

More recently, however, neuroscientists have demonstrated that all humans, along with a few mammals such as chimps, elephants and dolphins, possess something called 'mirror neurons'. This means we are all 'soft-wired' in such a way that when we look at another

person who is experiencing a strong emotion, like anger or joy, the same neuron being stimulated in their brain, will also be stimulated in yours.

Writer and economist Jeremy Rifkin expands on this research in his talk 'The Empathetic Civilisation', also beautifully animated by the RSA. Rifkin argues that the following holds true:

Firstly, that in our ancestral forager/hunter tribes, empathy was extended only to local tribes and blood ties.

Secondly, that in later years as the medium of writing evolved, empathy was no longer constrained by time and space, especially as tribes and communities came to believe in a common God.

Thirdly, that as modern nation states were eventually created, we began to view our fellow countrymen as extended family.

In the video above, Rifkin points out that if we accept that the empathic boundaries we have constructed between our nations and our religions are purely man-made fictions, then what reason is there to believe that the process should end here? For example, just a few weeks ago, the idea for an 'interspecies Internet' was announced at TED.

" We ought to rethink the human narrative and prepare the groundwork for an empathic civilisation. "

— Jeremy Rifkin

Thoughtful Storytelling = Adventurous Empathy

Few would disagree with Einstein's powerful sentiments about widening our compassion to extend to the whole planet, yet where does the modern pragmatic idealist begin? How can bridges be built to cross Roman's empathy gap or fuel the creation of Rifkin's empathic civilisation? We believe that the answer lies in storytelling. Specifically in emotionally charged, cross-cultural narratives that can be shared almost instantaneously

throughout the world via the Internet.

Roman uses the example of how storytelling was a powerful factor in the human rights movement and also in bringing about the abolition of the slave trade. We would like to highlight a more recent example of the power of storytelling to effect change - the Charity Water movement that was started by Scott Harrison, a former nightclub promoter. When Scott first visited Africa he was working as a photographer for Mercy Ships. He felt an overwhelming sense of empathy for the people he met and returned home determined to tell their story. Watch the video below and you'll understand how Scott used his storytelling superpowers to extend the empathy he felt to millions of others.

“ ...these stories are a kind of beacon. By making stories full of empathy and amusement and the sheer pleasure of discovering the world, these writers reassert the fact that we live in a world where joy and empathy and pleasure are all around us, there for the noticing. ”

— Ira Glass

It doesn't matter if the medium is long-form narrative, videography, photography or even art, whether it involves reminiscing about events of the past, telling narratives of the here and now, or spinning tales of the future and what could be. We imagine (and hope) that one day Maptia will be full of stories of outrospection and that people will think of maps as beautiful and creative tools for spreading adventurous empathy.