

Chronic Empathy

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My dream is living in the middle of the forest in an A-frame wooden cabin on the Sunshine Coast, with a dense clover yard and a garden full of indigenous plants. The beach is a five minute walk down the street, and the shops are also close by within walking distance. I will have a whole pack of rescued dogs, and my wildlife rehabilitation center would be successful in returning animals back to their habitat. What a simple life I want, where nights would be truly dark and I could tend to my vegetable garden with ample time to prune and plan. What an unrealistic life I want. Work hard, go to college, do what you love and you will achieve anything you put your mind to. Such lies we were told. They may have been true for generations past, but life is different now. I can try my best, but my best cannot change the tides of humanity.

Living with chronic empathy is a miserable condition. I want to live a life rooted in authenticity, but I am torn apart by the draw of selfishness to live for myself, and the guilt of putting myself before the needs of others. There are so many causes to support and they keep coming; My empathy is stretched thin. The world cried out for Breanna Taylor and George Floyd, and then for Ukraine, for the genocidal annihilation of the Palestinian people, the missing and murdered Indigenous women, for the impacts of colonization worldwide. It is impossible to live in this world full of pain and not feel guilty about having dreams of my own.

How could I bring myself to stop caring as much? I have heard people from older generations call the parade of causes a 'social justice bandwagon' but how could one not become enraged? Continually enraged. Continually guilty about not being able to do enough. Continually judged for not doing enough, not posting about the causes on Instagram enough, not giving enough money or resources when I'm trying my best to feed myself right now. Defending myself from this onslaught makes me feel too guilty - 'sorry, I can't care so much right now I

have other things to do.’ I want so desperately to care less, but I can’t bring myself to do so. Why is my life more important? Why are my privileged dreams worthwhile when people are dying of starvation? I am deeply troubled with finding balance, and I am sure that finding balance between self and fighting the inequalities of the world marks what is unique about the human condition today.

It was announced recently that France is to make fertility testing free in attempt to combat the falling birth rates. The total fertility rate worldwide is declining – but I would argue it is not because of the inability to conceive or find love. Myself and many others simply cannot justify bringing children into a world that guarantees anguish for all. What a selfish thought, to bear children that will have to suffer from the consequences of corporate greed and evil politicians, where capitalism is more important than human life.

I remember in highschool, one of my teachers said that within my generation wars would be fought over drinking water. Even today, many indigenous populations still do not have access to clean water. How could I bring a child into a world where they too would drown in guilt? People work so hard and convince themselves that their happiness is rooted in the joy of their children. Passions slip away, time passes, but at least they dedicated their life to make sure their children don’t have to suffer like they did. Those children grow up, have their own kids, and work hard to make sure they are happy... The cycle continues and what is the point? Who gets to be happy past innocent childhood? Who gets to achieve their dreams?

How could I even afford to have children? I am in my mid-twenties and am still making close to minimum wage regardless of spending almost a decade in post-secondary education. I recently had to cut my hours at work because my anxiety about the state of the world was

manifesting itself as becoming violently sick at the slightest inconvenience. Sounds like something that could be addressed at therapy! Just have to wait another two years until I reach the top of the waiting list! What a wonderful world to bring a child into.

The future is not guaranteed. Life can change drastically in an instant, as demonstrated by the global shutdown of 2020 caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. A rather large solar flare could destroy every bit of electronics worldwide at any given second, or the big-bang expansion of the universe could reverse into the 'big crunch' and we'd be gone in an instant. My generation is educated to understand the consequences of wishful thinking, of leaning solely on faith to gain prosperity. We have grown so accustomed to death and devastation, of watching our own slow global suicide, that many have put their future in fate's hands. What's the point of working hard for the future if there's a high likelihood that the future will never come?

The internet may bring joy, but what is incredibly overwhelming is the sense of scale. There are 9 billion people alive today, and billions more in the past, all which have left their individual mark on humanity and now, much of that is memorialized online. The internet allows people to visualize and interconnect, but the scale is beyond human cognition. One person cannot take on the burden of the wrongdoings and hypocrisy of the entire world, but we feel like we must. Every day we see more of the evils that humanity brings, often without the context and deep understanding of the issue at hand. Our brains cannot help but empathize to the point of burn-out, where we feel overwhelmed and small, incapable of inducing any significant change. Evolution didn't account for the internet, and yet this global network has hijacked our sense of scale and have made us feel inconceivably helpless to influence the tides of humanity.

The human experience in this present day is marked by empathy stretched thin. It is marked by the fear of the uncertain future, the isolation that comes with such interconnectedness. One aspect that has arisen from this monumental undertaking is the renewal of gratefulness. It is living in present moment, it is enjoying our surroundings and experiences as they come. It is reshaping our thoughts away from the anxiety of the future to the celebration of today. There are many catchy sayings and songs which coalesce into the theme of living each moment like it is one's last. Vile decisions will continue to occur, and no one will be spared from the devastation. People will continue to suffer, wars will be fought. So why not enjoy the moments of peace as they come?

Enjoy the touch of the sun, and how smooth stones by the ocean become warm under its rays. Find gratuity in being able to walk down the street freely, to stop and drink fresh clean water. Enjoy these moments now, for in the future they are not guaranteed. Yes, it is necessary to keep informed about the events happening. However, it is not one single person's responsibility to fix everything. Be passionate, but maintain respectfulness for yourself. You cannot do much good for the world in a constant state of burn-out. Live life with empathy, authenticity, and gratitude for the current moment.

I may not ever attain my idyllic cabin in the woods due to the actions and inactions of evil men, but I've made investments into my own happiness for the present moment. For years I dreamed of what I could do in the future, once I make enough money, once I buy my own house, once I become 'successful' despite never tangibly defining what threshold I must cross to achieve that status. I still have long-term goals, but I've found that they become much less daunting when broken down into miniscule steps. I'm going to 'waste' money on a silly little beverage, I'm

going to take time to read fluffy romance novels, as those are steps towards maintaining empathy towards myself. I have learned that the better that I take care of myself, the more energy and passion I can share with others. By keeping myself from burning-out through self-care, my resilience builds. The world doesn't seem as daunting. No matter what happens in the future, maintain and grow your empathy - for the world, and balanced with empathy for yourself.