

Empathy in action

Inspiring courageous citizens and a better world

BY PATRICIA RAUN

WHAT IS THE value of theatre education? That has been the central question of my life. The question first arose for me when I was a teenager who fell in love with the theatre. I will never forget the fights I had with my father and the worried look on my mother's face when I told my parents I wanted to study acting and theatre in college. "You have a great mind, Patty," my frustrated father shouted. "You need to use it for something more practical. Go into law or medicine. Make theatre an avocation, not a vocation."

I was the black sheep of a family of scientists and medical professionals — we had a copy of *Gray's Anatomy* (the book, not the television series) and a hefty taxonomic reference guide by the dinner table to settle family arguments. Unfortunately, I could not find evidence of the value of theatre training in those books.

My parents' love for me made them fear that our society would not value me if I followed my love of the theatre. There was no question in their minds about the value and impact of scientific exploration, but I needed to find a way to articulate the value and the impact of the exploration to which we theatre artists and educators are committed.

I'm sure most theatre folks have considered these questions for themselves and found many answers. What is the role of theatre in society? How can we and how do we make impact? What are we trained to do? What do we learn and know? How might we change the world for the better? We need the courage and the patience to articulate the answers to our families, to our communities, and to the world.

In our ever more divided country, I have grown increasingly frustrated by our fear of "the other," our self-

ishness, and our lack of humanity. My frustration has compelled me to use the gifts of the theatre where I believe they will have the greatest impact. As a trained professional actor, I am a fortunate inheritor of an ancient tradition and am a part of a growing community of artists exploring how the tools of the arts can be applied in the wider world.

For me, acting is the transformation of words and ideas into character through the performer's understanding and use of voice, body, and both analytical and observational abilities. In other words, it is the capacity to identify with and then embody another's point of view. It is empathy in action. There are many challenges we face as a society, but in my opinion, few tools are more important to our survival than the desire to see through someone else's eyes.

A tender moment from the musical *Spring Awakening*, performed on the 2016 Thespian Festival main stage by Troupe 5869 from the Denver School of the Arts in Colorado.



An invitation to do a TEDx talk a few years ago allowed me to articulate some information and ideas around the topic of empathy that had been gathering in my head for years. In the talk, I noted that the most important ethical choices of our time require us to understand the experiences of other people and to be willing to put the well-being of others above our own desires. This requires a balance between analytical thinking and empathetic thinking.

Several recent studies have charted a 40 percent decline in empathy in the U.S. and a marked rise in narcissism. The studies confirmed a shift that many of us have perceived in our experience over the past 30 years on the highways, in retail stores, at sporting events, at restaurants, and even more notably in the political arena.

Discoveries in neuroscience suggest that the ability to feel with another person is, to some degree, hardwired. It is part of the evolutionary advantage that we inherited from our ancestors. So, something about our social context is robbing us of this natural gift. The decline has been linked to many things, including social isolation, a decline in reading fiction that ignites our imagination, and an increased engagement with technologies.

Other recent research suggests that as one gains power, wealth, and status, one becomes less and less empathetic. Our democracy, if it is to survive, requires ethical, courageous, and *empathetic* leadership in all sectors — in business, politics, science, industry, religion, agriculture, engineering, education, and healthcare.

Additional studies have noted that humans may have neural constraints that inhibit simultaneous empathic and analytic processes. If this research holds true, then as our students are taught to understand and analyze scientific, mathematical, technological, and engineering information, they may be disadvantaging their empathic neural pathways.

This is why we need to add the “A” to STEM education. But rather than turn the acronym into STEAM (a mist that builds and dissipates), I playfully advocate rearranging the letters to create the acronym TEAMS — which suggests our urgent need to work together across disciplinary boundaries. Each of us must challenge ourselves to build both sets of muscles: the analytic and the empathetic.

If we can lose our ability to empathize, we can regain it and change ourselves. I am convinced that the tools of the theatre can help us

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rebalance our society and can assist in rebuilding a healthy democracy. Autism and empathy researcher Simon Baron-Cohen writes in his book *Zero Degrees of Empathy*, “Empathy occurs when we suspend our single-minded focus of attention and instead adopt a double-minded focus of attention. When our attention lapses into single focus, empathy has been turned off. When we shift our attention to dual focus, empathy has been turned on. Empathy is our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling and to respond to their thoughts or feelings with an appropriate emotion.” So, we see ourselves in the mirror of another’s story. But it means that we have to put down our current concerns for a time and to take up the experiences of another.

The world we live in calls for nothing less than transformational empathy. Our students are confused and despairing. Our friends and colleagues shake their heads at each

new tragedy. Where is there meaning? Where is community? Where is our understanding of mutual responsibility?

Organizations that have provided structure and support for society over the past several hundred years seem near collapse. Governmental organizations are being challenged by economic inequity, ideological chasms, and self-centeredness. Religious institutions face attrition in membership, increasing fundamentalism, and radicalization. Law enforcement is being asked to enforce the laws of a fearful and divided society. Public schools are maligned and inadequately supported. Higher education is becoming a commercial proposition beyond the reach of average Americans.

But more than our institutions and infrastructure seem to be crumbling. Our sense of community and compassion is in jeopardy as well. We theatre educators can use our experience to support the development of more courageous, humane, and empathetic citizens.

These are the reasons that my Virginia Tech colleagues and I have started the Center for Communicating Science: The Art of Connecting Across Difference. As we worked to organize our thoughts about the purpose it would play on a college campus, my colleague Dr. Carrie Kroehler and I wrote a white paper that articulates the way the center can create and support opportunities for scientists, scholars, health professionals, and others to develop their abilities to communicate and connect using theatre techniques.

We assert that our differences — whether they be racial, cultural, religious, education level, academic discipline, or research specialty — can divide us, but those differences also enrich our lives, broaden our perspectives, and strengthen our collaborations. Theatre tools and practices can be used to bridge these divisions, helping us learn to listen deeply, to interact personally,

directly, spontaneously, and responsively, and to express ourselves vividly.

We have found that tools and practices used in actor training have profoundly positive applications in the realms of collaboration and innovation. Social science research confirms that innovation is foundationally a result of collaboration. New ideas, new approaches, and new products are born of collaborative human interaction and creative teams.

As a society, we are increasingly aware of the fact that the most urgent challenges facing us are unfathomably complex, large, and interconnected wicked problems. These challenges cannot be addressed by individuals or by traditional competitive means. They require collaborative skills that allow new approaches and new systems to be developed.

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Collaboration helps individuals and societies to create new paradigms rather than revisiting old and failing structures. Modern theatre performance training has evolved over hundreds of years. It has been tested and refined to grow individual and group skills in collaboration — the very skills needed by those who would meet the challenges we face.

One benefit of performance practice is a deeper understanding of what it means to be fully expressive and fully connected to others. We have found that, through these practices, scientists and medical professionals begin to reconnect with the human dimensions of their work and with their responsibility to the public. With a focus on deep listening, the theatre games and exercises used in this approach to communication and collaboration promote and encourage cross-cultural understanding and an inclusive climate.

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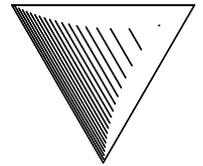
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Central to our mission is the intention to deepen human interaction, strengthen empathy and awareness of others and to develop collaborative team and leadership capacities in students, faculty, and scholars. These skills help people to teach more effectively, take risks, solve problems, collaborate within and across disciplines, secure funding, compete for positions, and advance their careers.

The work of the center embraces the principle of theatre educator Viola

Spolin, who wrote in her book *Improvisation for the Theater*, “If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he or she chooses to learn; and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach everything it has to teach.” The center creates, supports, and promotes environments and opportunities for participatory learning that leads to communication that is direct, personal, spontaneous, and responsive.

We are committed to the heart of the concept “hands on, minds on.” As we have always known in the theatre, embodied learning is learning that lasts. Experimentation, awareness of others, and providing a safe space to take risks all help to open connections among people. Training in improvisational skills fosters successful collaborations. Participants pay close attention, listen and observe deeply, and accept and build on others’ actions and offerings while staying flexible and open.

Creative investment, freedom, and unconventional approaches to problem-solving ignite participants’ imaginations and open paths to effective thinking. Arts practices help participants develop confidence, allow them to learn to fail, and encourage them to follow failure with risk. These are the skills that individuals in all sectors of our society urgently need to connect the public with their work and to connect with one another.

I believe that theatre training teaches practically everything one needs to know. In the theatre, we study politics, physics, design, psychology, history, narrative arcs, interpersonal communication, engineering, business, audience response, collaboration, and much more. The way that theatre teaches us to approach the large and small ethical dilemmas of daily life is the most valuable of the skills that one gains in the theatre.

Ethical choices require:

- empathy;
- a sense of responsibility for others;
- deep knowledge of complex issues;
- evaluation of options;

- time for contemplation and reflection;
- an open mind;
- ability to imagine multiple outcomes;
- willingness to put the well-being of the whole above one’s own desires; and
- the ability to choose between good or bad.

Don’t our students learn those skills when they work on plays? If we are doing our jobs, they do! Theatre makes us consider ourselves, our values, and our behavior. We measure our own lives against the lives we bring to the stage. We imagine what it would be like if we had those lives. And it leads us to say, “Gee, maybe there’s something I should change about my own life” or “Gee, do I need to look with more compassion on those that live differently than I do?” We challenge ourselves and our communities to see things differently and more deeply. We model the skills required to make ethical choices.

Those of us trained in the theatre work to strengthen muscles of compassion and inclusion every day. We study ways to make beauty from all of life’s complications. We open up difficult conversations. We focus light on the human condition. We learn how to create elegant and meaningful rituals celebrating our shared and fragile humanity. We listen. We give voice. We are skilled at working together collaboratively and valuing varied gifts. We practice giving and taking responsibility. We explore what it means to be fully human and to be accountable to our communities.

As theatre teachers, we must help our students see the importance of their work in the broadest context. They must learn to believe in, articulate, and defend their developing skills as theatre artists and to understand how these skills can help build a world of compassion and understanding. We all know that theatre can save the world. Our job is teach our students to embrace this truth, for themselves and their own children. **T**

Learn more

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