

Empathy

With an emphasis on the tech community

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Pittsburgh Code and Supply

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Outline

- 1 Why this talk?
- 2 What empathy is (and isn't)
- 3 Examples of empathy (or not) in my career
- 4 Downsides of empathy?
- 5 Some ongoing projects relevant to empathy
- 6 Conclusion

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I almost quit the tech community in 2014

Paradox in 2014

- *Locally*: many good things happening
- *Globally*: many bad things I saw online
- *Personally*: doubts about my own direction

Not my first moment of doubt

I have quit the tech community before: 1999–2009

December 2014

- Identified the core problem: lack of *empathy*
- Decided to change my life
- Proposed this talk topic for Pittsburgh Code and Supply

What happened in 2014?

What I saw online

- Discourse got worse: Twitter, Reddit, mailing lists, etc.
- Not just tech, but especially tech: people talking past each other, yelling
- Realized I'm part of the problem too

I felt dissonance with my mission

- Teaching
- Learning
- Sharing
- Actually being helpful

Stepping away

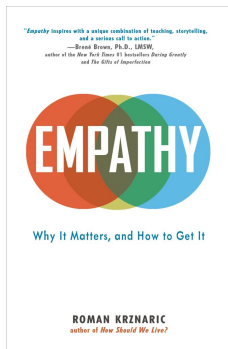
Changes I've made

- I changed how I behave online
- I temporarily stopped writing for my three blogs
 - ▶ Not satisfied with my old writings
- I changed my focus in my side projects, to incorporate more empathy

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Good book on empathy



Roman Krznaric: *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It*

What empathy isn't

Empathy is *not*:

- Fuzzy, feel-good sentiment
- Being tender and caring toward others
- Sympathy, feeling sorry for someone
- Charity, self-sacrifice
- Compassion

Especially: not the Golden Rule

Golden Rule

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”

What empathy is

Empathy is:

“The art of stepping *imaginatively* into the shoes of another person, *understanding* their *feelings* and *perspectives*, and using that understanding to guide your *actions*”

Imagination

- Requires conscious effort
- It's hard!
- It can be intriguing
- It can be unsettling, make you feel vulnerable

Empathy even for enemies?



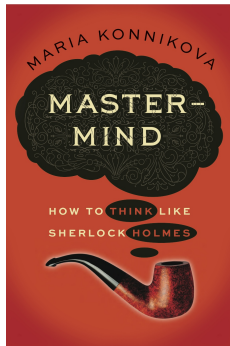
Nelson Mandela and de Klerk
(Photo from [Reuters](#))

The two halves of empathic understanding

Affective “emotional” side

Cognitive “rational” side (“perspective-taking”)

Cognitive empathy



Sherlock Holmes, strategic about understanding people.

Both halves are needed

A sociopath can

- Understand you very well
- But not care about your well-being

Back to the Golden Rule

Is there an alternative to the Golden Rule?

The Platinum Rule

Platinum Rule

“Do unto others as they would have you do unto them”

People are different from you.

- Different values
- Different interests
- Different goals

A true test of empathy: when you might have something to lose

“Empathic dissent”

- Empathy doesn't mean agreement
- It means understanding

“I have no idea why they would do/think that!”: a starting point, not a dead end

Self-empathy

Put yourself in your own shoes too!

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My first computing experiences

Middle school:

- 6th grade: forced by math teacher to stay after school and learn BASIC and program TRS-80
- Teacher used wrong filter for who would be interested!

High school:

- 9th grade: “computer literacy” credit required, took COBOL, almost failed
- School requirements inflexible

Why I quit computer programming after high school

High school:

- 11th grade: Advanced Placement Computer Science (1985, Pascal)
 - ▶ Took in order to never have to code again!!
- A classmate named all his variables four-letter words
 - ▶ I felt bad for the teacher but didn't say anything
- Long nights of debugging
 - ▶ Development environments were, and still are, **inhumane** (Bret Victor)

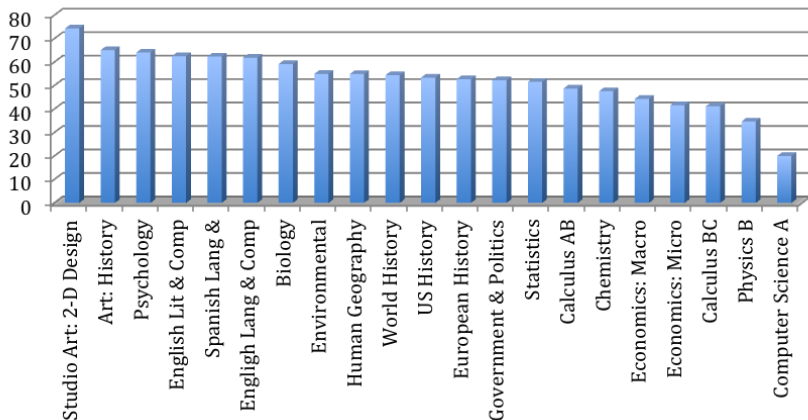
College:

- (Was physics major)
- Failed freshman week BASIC programming exam (had to learn enough `vi` and Unix)
- Computing culture turned me off
 - ▶ Weed-out classes, much bragging
- Consequence: no computer programming in college

Women in computing

30 years later, still **problems attracting women in the US!**

Percent of Women AP Exam Takers, by Subject, 2014



Who is a “real programmer”?

For my first job as a software developer after leaving physics (1993): I found C very hard to learn

- Different levels of skill
- Different programming languages
- Different editor preferences
- Different application domains (front end, back end, etc.)

Tech industry vs. academia

At first job (1993), noticed mockery of “academic” computer science:

- High-level languages were made fun of
- Memory management: garbage collection
- Safety

Engineering team vs. marketing, sales, management

“Us vs. them” mindset: caused a major project to eventually fail.

- As junior developer, didn't know what to say about what I saw
- I just kept reading the Dilbert comic strip
- No easy answers, but learned something for later

Brief time in academia (1997–1999)

Programming in C/C++ was very hard for me. I wanted to learn how to improve programming for everyone.

CMU CS PhD program

“My career objective is to contribute to research into higher-level programming language concepts, their rigorous mathematical definition, implementations, and actual use in software development environments.”

- My first time teaching (TA for freshman CS): a revelation about empathy!
- Lost interest in research
- Cared more about teaching, usability
- Academia a bad fit, I dropped out

Noticed mockery of industry (Java, attention to UI, etc.)

Opportunities for empathy

Immersion in different communities

- Observe what “insiders” think about the “other”
- Actually swap roles

CMU psychology department (2002–present)

- Boss is psychology professor
- My users: researchers in psychology, linguistics, law, etc.
- Older, nontechnical people
- Iterative process

Usability is critical:

- Error messages, recovery
- Git workflow
- Open communication about what software features are feasible

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Downsides of empathy?

Power imbalances:

- Hard to have empathy for someone trying to destroy us
- Racists, sexists?
- Limited energy?
- Asymmetric situations: “false equivalence”

Paul Bloom against empathy: mostly focused on downsides of the emotional aspect

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Some ongoing projects relevant to empathy

- My marriage
- Teaching chess
- Presentations for Code and Supply on Scala, Haskell, Rust
- New project in progress, to teach programming
- Ideas for improving usability for developers
- Contributing to open source projects

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Conclusion

- Empathy is part of being fully human
- Empathy is both affective and cognitive understanding
- Empathy is not always easy
- Expand your world, understand more people
- The tech world could use more empathy, especially for new learners, users

“Empathy is a state of mind, not a specific technique”

Slides

- Source: <https://github.com/FranklinChen/empathy-talk>
- PDF with hyperlinks: <https://github.com/FranklinChen/empathy-talk/raw/master/presentation.pdf>