

Practicing Empathy through Music (draft)  
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Writing music is my way of practicing empathy. We all have the ability, some better than others, to empathize with other humans. Experiencing love and loss are intrinsically human things, and we are programmed at a genetic level to know what those feel like. This is what millennials like me mean when we say things like “#relatable”, “this is so us”, or “lmao same”. Empathy is the ability to share the feelings of another person who is feeling the same thing. But to relate to that individual, one must know what that emotion is, and to practice knowing what it is. The first part is easy because we know how to define things such as grief or happiness, but the second part, actually feeling those emotions, is more difficult and requires, in my opinion, practice.

I have a couple ways to practice this important skill. First, when I am *composing music*, I am simply writing down what I know I can feel inside, and what we all can feel inside. And because I have written it down, I can now practice performing my own song, and practice tapping into intrinsic emotions such as selfless love, the grief of losing a significant other, or the joy of parental love, even if I have not necessarily experienced all those things.

Second, *practicing and listening* to the songs of other composers and artists helps you tap into others’ experiences and emotions. In a good song, we can strongly relate and empathize with what he or she is feeling, even if whatever is happening in the song is not happening in that moment. Again, when we practice or listen to these songs repeatedly, we practice *feeling*.

The downside with any of this is that I risk falling deep into dark places. Part of that process requires improvising, and hearing what sounds good and what I am feeling in the moment. In mathematical optimization terms, this would be comparable to getting stuck in a local minimum. Because I am feeling depressed, I’ll improvise very depressing music, and continue feeling depressed in an endless spiral. But at least I know what depression feels like, because it becomes too real. When this happens, I stop practicing piano and go outside, which brings me to the overlooked part of empathizing – *taking care of yourself*. We need to take care of ourselves. Even though I am an emotional extrovert and I draw energy from interacting people daily from Lyft driving or my barista job, people are not limitless batteries of energy, and even I get exhausted from time to time. When you’re helping someone deal with grief and depression, it is okay to say, “I need to take a break”, or “I need some time to myself.” I say that as someone who has experienced both sides and realize how important rest is.

I would like to end with why we need to practice empathy at all. Empathy is an amazing tool when you have the energy and have practiced how to feel emotions. Especially in today’s political and racial climate, empathy is something we need more and more of today. Giving empathy propagates the important idea that we are all human, and far more alike than different. It also causes us to think twice before judging others. And if we want to make that world a reality, it starts with any of the little things we do in our own lives, like music, art, cooking, or dancing. It starts with you and me.