

EMPATHY

“Empathy is empty. Hannah Arendt says we don’t need to feel what someone else is feeling - first of all that’s impossible, second of all it’s self-righteous and breeds complacency, third of all it’s politically irresponsible. Empathize with someone and suddenly you’re erasing the boundaries of your own conscience, suddenly you’re living under the tyranny of their desires. We need to know how to think how their thinking. From a distance.”

Teresa’s words from *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* call attention to a tension in the play around the role of empathy in theatre and society writ large. BLUEBARN invites audiences to examine the production from the framework of empathy—how it operates, is expressed, motivates action, and is weaponized by the characters and ourselves.

What is empathy?

The word “empathy” came into the English language in the early 1900s, originating from the German “Einfühlung” or “in-feeling.” When first used, the term described the act of outwardly demonstrating one’s feelings or memories while experiencing something emotional. Theresa Wiseman’s 1996 seminal study *A concept analysis of empathy* outlines four attributes of empathy: see the world as another sees it; do so without judgement; understanding the other’s feelings; communicate the understanding. These days, vulnerability expert Dr. Brené Brown defines empathy as “feeling with people.”

How does empathy show up?

Empathy is often subdivided into two types: cognitive empathy (understanding another’s feeling or perspective); emotional or affective (feeling as another does, sometimes as if it was you). Some add a third: empathetic concern, sometimes called compassion (sensing another’s needs and acting to assist or support them). Empathy differs from pity or sympathy, because these involve feeling for another and possess an inherent power differential (the observer who is the stronger, the feeler who is weaker). The concept of empathy presupposes there are emotional commonalities across diverse lived experiences.

What’s the problem with empathy?

There’s no action associated with empathy. Because empathy is generated mostly at the unconscious level, it’s an impulsive experience and not likely to lead to intentional action. Empathy is, at its core, voyeuristic, presumptive, and colonizing; one’s empathy necessitates seeing another’s pain, assuming a like-mindedness or shared emotional understanding, and appropriates it as one’s one. Empathy can also be used nefariously, in the case of “dark empathy.” Dark empathes are highly attuned cognitive empathes who use their empathy to manipulate others for their own benefit (think emotional manipulation).