



The Limits of Empathy: Why Feeling Isn't Always Knowing

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Is empathy always good? Without scrutiny, it feeds bias, but with reality testing, it grounds compassion in truth.

In two articles published here ([Bridle Your Empathy](#) and [Empathy or Echo Chambers](#)), I have discussed some lesser-understood challenges in the exercise of empathy. In response to these previous articles, I saw my stance labeled “anti-empathy”—a response I expected. In popular culture, empathy is understood to have an almost sacred value: empathy is never to be scrutinized, questioned, or second-guessed. To even suggest empathy can be a force for anything but good surprises many people. Since many have never imagined criticizing empathy in any possible way, anything but affirmation and praise only registers as an attack on empathy.

Some might be inclined to “balance” the always positive messaging surrounding empathy by making sharp statements about empathy’s problems and drawbacks. This seems to have been the logic behind two recent book titles. The first is *The Sin of Empathy: Compassion and Its Counterfeits* by Christian theologian Joe Rigney, which offers a Christian perspective on how empathy is misused in the context of faith. The second is the forthcoming book *Suicidal Empathy* by Concordia University professor Gad Saad, which will reflect his popular commentary on how societies implement self-destructive policies in the name of empathy. However, those of us engaged in critical discussions of empathy have a greater task beyond articulating negatives. Our real challenge is in educating and promoting readers toward an effective mode of empathy.

Reality Testing

Expanding upon my previous articles, I suggest empathy leads to good only when paired with reality testing. A concept commonly employed in psychotherapy, reality testing is the process of examining beliefs and perceptions to see if they align with reality.

In a situation like psychosis, a person might suffer from a delusion that they are a world leader or divine figure. The task of a mental health professional is to help this person develop an ability to engage in some amount of reality testing, self-evaluating their identity-belief to see if it is true. In a less severe situation, a therapist can invite reality testing in response to excessive pessimism, using tools like Cognitive Behavior Therapy to help the client develop thought processes that are more based in truth. In both cases, the ability to live well in reality is seen as the measure of well-being.

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Beyond the context of mental health, reality testing is considered to be important in politics. I say “considered to be” because many tend to assume their political views are based in reality. Many also believe that differing political views arise because others have not engaged in sufficient reality testing. Further, individuals often delegate the task of reality testing to those who curate their political information. By assuming the source has already done their due diligence of reality testing, they treat the information they receive from them as a final product. Reality testing in politics involves accounting for bias in our sources and actively seeking multiple perspectives.

In the United States and Europe, our politics are in a crisis of empathy without reality testing, and much of our lack of reality testing comes from our lack of confidence in institutions that we relied upon in the past to perform that function. This has been a long process, underway for decades. For example, some readers remember the [presentation](#) made by General Colin Powell to the United Nations in 2003, making the case that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction. When the extensive WMD program described in his speech was not found in our subsequent invasion of Iraq, the U.S. intelligence community suffered a tremendous loss of public credibility as a source for reality testing.

More recently, *The Atlantic* writer Thomas Chatterton Williams [described](#) how decisions in the public health establishment during the COVID pandemic helped to undermine this confidence:

... As the direct consequence of lockdowns and quarantines, many millions of people around the world lost their income, depleted their savings, missed farewells and funerals of loved ones, postponed cancer screenings, never experienced graduations and proms, at times went without human touch entirely, and generally put their lives on pause for the indefinite future. They accepted these sacrifices as awful but necessary when confronted by an otherwise unstoppable virus. And then, from one day to the next, they were told with a straight face that this had all been done in vain. “The risks of congregating during a global pandemic shouldn’t keep people from protesting racism,” NPR announced with eyebrow-raising certitude, citing a letter signed by dozens of American public health officials and disease experts. “White supremacy is a lethal public health issue that predates and contributes to COVID-19,” the letter further explained. One prominent epidemiologist went still further, arguing that the public health risks of not protesting for an end to systemic racism “greatly exceed the harms of the virus.”

To encourage protesting and thereby spread a deadly disease among the protestors themselves, members of our public health establishment gave the impression they were driven by ideology more than public safety. Because of that decision, public health officials ceased to be a viable source of reality-testing for many. The consequences of this have been severe. On questions of public health, a large segment of Americans has turned to alternative voices for reality testing, and it is possible that institutions like the

Centers for Disease Control will never recover the valuable role for reality testing they once held.

Other examples could be cited, but Americans who wish to employ reality testing for our political views face an uphill battle when seeking sources that have not been significantly compromised.

Reality testing in faith

The council system of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is an excellent mechanism for bringing reality testing into decision-making. Many painful moments in the Church's history resulted from decisions made outside the council system and the reality testing it offers. Perhaps the most notable example is the Mountain Meadows Massacre, where local church leaders in Southern Utah sent a request for guidance from President Brigham Young, and then, in a failure of the council process, they made terrible decisions before allowing enough time to include his voice in their deliberations. President James E. Faust [once said](#) the council system among the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve “provides a check on bias and personal idiosyncrasies ... guard[ing] against the foibles of man.”

Reality testing is very important at an individual level for a life of faith. It builds mature thought processes for withstanding the pull of extreme viewpoints and the chaotic and poisonous messaging of accusers and detractors. It assists when evaluating whether a concept is doctrinal or not—as explained by Elder Christofferson in [“The Doctrine of Christ.”](#) To examine whether beliefs are grounded in reality, one can use [epistemology](#)—the process of thinking through how one arrived at their beliefs. In this process, the combined value of personal experiences, witness testimony, observation, and other sources of knowledge is considered.

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When President Dieter F. Uchtdorf [encouraged](#) church members to “doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith,” this was another invitation to reality testing. To “doubt our doubts” is to honestly inquire whether those doubts are the product of sound assumptions and mature thinking. Many people over the years have assumed that if something can be criticized without a satisfactory response, then—by default—it must

not be true. But this same logic leads people to “deconstruct” their [belief that the world is round](#) or adopt other wild conspiracy theories. For people in these situations, the solution is to learn to deconstruct one’s own deconstruction and apply reality testing to the doubts.

Empathy and reality testing

The motte and bailey is a rhetorical trick where an individual gets an opposing party to agree with a very agreeable position (the motte). However, the individual then swaps the agreeable position for an extreme position (the bailey) to reframe the opposing party’s agreement within the more extreme argument. An example is the following hypothetical exchange:

Person 1: “The Bible says that we should be kind to the stranger among us.” (motte)

Person 2: “I agree.”

Person 1: “Then of course you must also agree that no one should ever be deported or extradited from our country. If not, then you don’t believe in the Bible!” (bailey)

Empathy is manipulatively employed in the motte for a number of baileys that afflict the nations of the world. For example, in 1987, the popular rock band U2 released a haunting [song](#) called “Mothers of the Disappeared,” written for the grieving mothers of youth who disappeared under right-wing authoritarian movements in South America during the 1970s. I consider it one of the most beautiful songs I have ever heard, and the song always achieves its intended purpose with me: leading me to feel deep mourning for the political violence of that era. Since I first heard “Mothers of the Disappeared,” I have learned more of the history and have wondered, why has not a similar song been written for the children taken from their families under the regime of Mao Tse-Tung, or for the quarter of the population of Cambodia wiped out under the Khmer Rouge? Fascist right-wing movements tend to arise in response to fear and legitimate grievances in the wake of cruel, authoritarian left-wing Marxist movements. Both Marxism and fascism exploit empathy over grievances and injustice toward specific groups as the motte for authoritarian baileys of oppression. Part of reality testing is to apply scrutiny to empathy itself and discern whether empathy is applied selectively to

one group or another based on whether they align with the ideological left or right. If so, then one is not really practicing empathy, only partisan sympathy.

In a recent [article](#) for Quillette, Brian Stewart wrote a criticism of the empathy-drenched commentary of New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof:

From his perch at America's newspaper of record, Kristof has spent many years travelling to far-flung places ravaged by poverty, famine, genocide, and war, and rubbing his nose in the misery he finds there. These trips through landscapes of privation and atrocity have brought forth a steady stream of lugubrious dispatches documenting the world's ills and enjoining the rest of us to do something about them.

Stewart argues that Kristof's columns reflect no understanding of tradeoffs or unintended consequences. In his reporting on Gaza in particular, Kristof makes claims and moral judgments and avoids asking necessary questions like *what Israel is facing*, *what Hamas intends*, and *what the consequences would be for different choices*. Kristof speaks to the empathy of his readers, but does no reality testing.

Finally, in an example relevant to many Latter-day Saints, reflect on how LGBT+ ally groups and conferences offer messaging heavily focused on empathy, but lack any of the reality testing that might help participants see the validity of the Church's teachings and policies. In the recent YouTube series *An Inconvenient Faith* (2025), church members who consider themselves LGBT+ allies resisted any [kind of study](#) that would lead them to ask: *are my views actually true*, and *could The Church's teachings possibly be correct*? Adapting the [phrase](#) of Paul, empathy without reality testing seems to leave us "ever feeling and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth."

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And so, we return to the question: If empathy has possible drawbacks, then what is a positive and healthy exercise of empathy? The answer: empathy becomes a force for good only when paired with reality testing. Only then can empathy lead to human

flourishing as opposed to performative partisan sympathy, moral grandstanding, and other unhelpful behaviors.

As Edith Stein expressed, “Do not accept anything as truth that lacks love. Do not accept anything as love which lacks truth.”

About the author



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