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Excerpt from Wisdom Hackers dispatch

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“IN EVERYONE’S LIFE, AT SOME TIME, OUR INNER FIRE GOES OUT. IT IS THEN BURST INTO FLAME BY AN ENCOUNTER WITH ANOTHER HUMAN BEING. WE SHOULD ALL BE THANKFUL FOR THOSE PEOPLE WHO REKINDLE THE INNER SPIRIT.”

– Albert Schweitzer (Nobel Peace Prize, 1952)

+ Wisdom Hacker question:

How do we create a global network of sustainable empathy?

+ Synopsis:

Empathy levels have plummeted all around the world over the past few decades. Examples of empathy deficits are reflected in a significant decline of social trust, fraying community resilience, and increase of racial and religious discrimination, and across sectors as diverse as technology, medicine, finance, government, higher education and entertainment. The inability to relate to one another with basic human respect is affecting us on every level of society as individuals, families, communities and institutions. How do we radically change the way we engage with each other and the world around us in order to create a global network of sustainable empathy?

+ Intro video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0AJZuVZkDA>

“ALL LIFE IS INTERRELATED. WE ARE ALL CAUGHT IN AN INESCAPABLE NETWORK OF MUTUALITY, TIED INTO A SINGLE GARMENT OF DESTINY. WHATEVER AFFECTS ONE DESTINY, AFFECTS ALL INDIRECTLY.”

– **Martin Luther King Jr.**

Imagine a world where humans didn't have the capacity for empathy. What would it mean if we stopped caring about other people? The inability to relate to one another with basic human respect is affecting us on every level of society as individuals, families, communities and institutions. How do we radically change the way we engage with each other and the world around us in order to create a global network of sustainable empathy?

Empathy is as much a cognitive process as it is an emotional and physiological one. The act of thinking combines sensations, feelings, emotions and abstract reasoning in an embodied system that operates as a whole, and a new generation of neuroscientists, biologists, economists, philosophers, linguists, psychologists and sociologists are beginning to approach the understanding of human nature through the belief that knowing yourself or your experiences is only activated by understanding how you exist relative to others. For empathy activation to occur, face-to-face engagement is crucial.

Matthew Lieberman, a pioneer of social cognitive neuroscience, states that our need to connect with other people is even more fundamental, more basic, than our need for food or shelter. As a primary driver behind our behavior, our brains react to social pain and pleasure in much the same way they do to physical pain and pleasure. Frans de Waal, one of the most influential researchers studying behavior and social intelligence of primates and the parallel between primate and human behavior, believes empathy is the foundational mechanism through which we're able to read one another's feelings and intentions in order to build cooperative links and social solidarity.

However, according to Sara Konrath and the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, empathy levels in the United States have dropped 48% over the past 40 years. There's a feedback loop where the problems that contribute to erosion of empathy lead to symptoms that lead to a decline of social connectivity, which contribute to further erosion of empathy. Konrath cites the increase in social isolation, which has coincided with the drop in empathy. The status quo of our relationship with technology is clearly not satisfactory. Studies have repeatedly found that social media erodes our sense of well-being as people who use social networks become unhappy, discontent about themselves, and with increased feelings of isolation or loneliness. The American Time Use Survey tracks how the amount of time we sit in front of our computers for leisure has drastically increased over the past decade, while the time we spend socializing offline has dramatically decreased.

A Pew Internet Study in the U.S. found that attention spans and in depth analysis are being diminished by instant access to computers and online platforms. The internet has eroded our attention spans and rewired our brains to anticipate instant gratification while rates of narcissism have skyrocketed. The focus and ability to be present in the process of getting to know someone is disappearing, while the tools that are supposed to be connecting us

actually prevent the conditions for relationship building efforts. Psychologist Raymond Mar found a direct relationship between a young child's aptitude for understanding other peoples' emotions and the number of stories they read, and that adults increase their ability to empathize as they read more fiction. However, the number of American adults who read for pleasure is also shrinking, most quickly amongst young adults. We are no longer able to sit and think deeply when we are bombarded with a constant stream of information and cat videos.

The cyclical nature of empathy to social connectivity can also be reversed into a positive direction. As one of the founders of Positive Psychology, Martin Seligman is a leading authority in the fields of Positive Psychology, resilience, learned helplessness, depression, optimism and pessimism. Seligman developed the PERMA model, which identifies the five components essential to well-being. One of the most important conditions that needs to be met in order for a person to flourish is depth of their relationships, and one of the most tangible signs of happiness and well-being is a person's satisfaction with the quality of relationships in their day-to-day lives.

However, shifting family structures, changing attitudes towards religion and the consequential loss of social capital that religious communities once provided, and transitional mobility in dense urban environments create stress and instability in social connectivity. Vulnerability from lacking "a sense of community" is a top reason for academic dropout, depression, suicide, and joining gang, cult or terrorism activities. According to the World Health Organization, global suicide rates have increased 60% in the past 45 years. An FBI study reports an increase of criminal gang membership in the U.S. as much as 40 percent (1.4 million people) in the past three years.

"IF THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION WERE CLEANSED EVERY THING WOULD APPEAR TO MAN AS IT IS, INFINITE."

– William Blake

For most people who are unaware of the expansive field of study around emotional intelligence, the word "empathy" conjures up warm and fuzzy images of puppies and rainbows, a pipe dream of progressive left-wing hipster millennials too naïve to understand how the world really works. Stereotypically associated with the realm of women, this "soft skill" is consistently swept aside as a nice-to-have characteristic rather than considered the fundamental hallmark of a rational and productive human being who's able to make decisions that consider the world beyond their immediate needs. "Empathetic" people are dismissed as being emotional and irrational.

It's important to properly define and identify empathy as a developable skillset in order to fully understand the power of its nuances. People often confuse empathy and sympathy. Brené Brown – author, public speaker and researcher on vulnerability – describes the difference: "Empathy fuels connection. Sympathy drives disconnection. Empathy is feeling

WITH people. Sympathy is trying to find a silver lining." Sympathy is disengaged pity. Empathy is listening with humility. According to researchers at the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, empathy development actually falls into two distinct categories: cognitive (or "perspective taking") empathy and affective (or "emotional") empathy.

Cognitive empathy refers to the deliberate process of accurately identifying and understanding other peoples' emotions. "Imagine yourself in someone else's shoes" is the kind of emotional intelligence described in business, university, medical settings, and articles in professional publications that apply tactics to work-related issues like leadership, networking, negotiations, design thinking and conflict resolution. Designers employ cognitive empathy when creating user experience solutions for consumer products and apps. Perspective taking requires careful thought, self-awareness, and real listening without judgment. For individuals, these skills are correlated with greater success in reasoning, collaboration, and academic and professional performance.

But when people try to understand another person's point of view without internalizing his or her emotions, they can be so detached that they're not motivated to do anything to actually relate to or help that person. Reasoning based solely on numbers and metrics without emotional input results in irrational and potentially harmful decisions, which leads us to the complementary integration of affective empathy. Antonio Damasio, a neurologist, came to his insights about the crucial role that emotions play in structuring human thoughts and pro-social behavior in researching the decision-making abilities of highly-functioning patients with brain damage that altered their ability to process feelings, emotions and reasoning. He concluded "certain aspects of the process of emotional and feeling are indispensable for rationality."

Affective empathy allows us to deeply feel another person's emotional state as if it was our own. In the 1980s, neuroscientists discovered the existence of "mirror neurons," which revolutionized the way we understand human development. We now know that we automatically and physically feel what other people feel, as though their emotions were contagious. This is the instinctive pain we feel when we watch someone ski into a tree in a "Funniest Home Video" clip, or the triumphant rush of joy felt within a sports stadium when your team wins. There is substantial correlation between those who lack a fully functioning mirror neuron system and autism. Mirror neuron deficiency is connected to the inability to understand intention or forecast another person's mental state from observing their behavior. It also affects an individual's communication and language development as a result of not being able to relate to other people's cues and signals.

However, our capacity for emotional empathy can get overloaded when we lack the ability to handle our own stress or anxiety. Empathy fatigue is very real for people who are in sales, rescue responders, social workers or nurses and doctors, which can lead to paralysis and psychological exhaustion. People sometimes find a healthy outlet in self-management exercises like mindfulness and meditation to help manage the stress, or sometimes they take on self-preservation measures to prevent this kind of burnout by developing a sense of detachment. There are times when cultivated detachment can be useful during critical

moments, but the problem is when detachment from other people leads to overall indifference. This is the problem we currently face on a global level, according to Daniel Goleman, a leading pioneer in emotional intelligence research.

Goleman makes the case for a third category of empathy: compassionate empathy. A later stage behavior of empathy put to action, compassionate empathy is when we not only understand a person's predicament and feel with them, but are moved to help, if needed. It's the backbone of communities coming together in times of emergency, when we go out of our way to pick up ice cream for our friend going through a breakup, or what motivates us to give someone on the street a dollar. Paul Ekman, one of the most influential psychologists of the 20th century best known for research in nonverbal behavior, calls compassionate empathy a skill, the acquired knowledge "that we're all connected."

"WE'VE SACRIFICED CONVERSATION FOR MERE CONNECTION."

– Sherry Turkle (robotics expert at MIT and author of *Alone Together*)

In the past 30 years Americans have become more likely to live alone and less likely to join groups – ranging from PTAs to political parties to casual sports teams. Several studies hint that this type of isolation can take a toll on people's attitudes toward others. Steve Duck of the University of Iowa has found that socially isolated, as compared with integrated, individuals evaluate others less generously after interacting with them, and Kenneth J. Rotenberg of Keele University in England has shown that lonely people are more likely to take advantage of others' trust to cheat them in laboratory games.

Examples of empathy deficits around the world are reflected in a significant decline of social trust, fraying community resilience, an increase of racial and religious discrimination, and across sectors as diverse as technology, medicine, finance, government, education and entertainment. In the UK, the empathy deficit is reflected in a chronic decline of social trust. Fifty years ago, 60% of people thought others could generally be trusted. Now, the number is under 30%. Rising levels of conservative nationalism indicate an intolerance of the "other," where xenophobic calls for anti-immigration measures have become popular political platforms around the world.

In Australia, racial and religious discrimination is climbing to its highest level since surveys began in 2007. According to the United Nations, there is a disturbing upsurge of violence against women and girls that touches every corner of the globe and is one of the world's most pervasive human rights violations. A Cornell University study by Matthew Brashears found that both the quantity and quality of real friends have decreased for most Americans. In the past 30 years, the average number of close friendships has declined down to only two, and half feel they only have one person they can talk to. Among this half, many of them felt they had no one to turn to for support in times of need (defined as companionship, financial help or a place to stay).

Danielle Ofri, author of the critically acclaimed *What Doctors Feel: How Emotions Affect the Practice of Medicine*, describes how eroding empathy levels among physicians and other medical practitioners, the cornerstone of effective patient-doctor communication, may have long-reaching consequences on health. Patients of doctors who score lower on empathy measurement tests appear to have worse clinical outcomes. For example, diabetic patients have worse control of their blood sugar and cholesterol. Cancer patients experience more depression. Medication compliance diminishes. Even the common cold can last longer. For patients, social isolation and loneliness from lacking a core support network have as much negative impact on physical health as smoking, and is twice as dangerous as obesity.

The first generation of college students who began exhibiting sharply declining levels of empathy now has kids. Empathy promotes pro-social relationships, helps mediate aggression and allows us to relate to others, all of which make empathy an important skill among children. While empathy education for these children has been developed, implementation has been slow due to overstretched teachers and budgets. For those already on the edge of what's considered social normality, these negative trends and a lack of older role models can have devastating results around the world.

“IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT SOMETHING AS SMALL AS THE FLUTTER OF A BUTTERFLY'S WING CAN ULTIMATELY CAUSE A TYPHOON HALFWAY AROUND THE WORLD.”

– Chaos theory

The facilitation and development of tangible human-to-human connection points are crucial to our mental, physical and emotional health as individuals and as a society. There is an expressed desire to connect to something beyond people's own existence, indicated through collective empathic surges like relief efforts following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Caine's Arcade where people from all over Los Angeles came together in 2012 to play the imaginary arcade games of a little boy, or most recently, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. These uplifting examples showcase the best side of humanity, but we need to recalibrate our existence for sustainable well-being and figure out how to integrate day-to-day solutions for creating these bonds.

Chris Allen Thomas, of the Teleos Leadership Institute, describes how developing one's emotional intelligence for an individual means learning the skills to become more aware of and capable of controlling your response to your own and to others' emotions in order to better manage relationships. If an organization at its root is a network of individuals engaging in relationships, bringing emotional and cognitive empathy into balance for an individual has the power to affect change on an organizational level.

According to the World Bank, social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions. Increasing evidence shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for

development to be sustainable. Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions that underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together. But all over the world, citizens express abysmally low levels of trust in their government, corporations and institutions.

A joint study by Fabio Sabatini of Sapienza University in Rome and Francesco Sarracino at STATEC in Luxembourg of 50,000 people in Italy concludes that online social networks have a significant negative impact on individual welfare, mainly because the use of social network sites is associated with lower social trust. Using a well-established measure of subjective well-being, the researchers asked, “How satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?” They found that face-to-face interactions and the trust people place in one another are strongly correlated with well-being in a positive way. In other words, if you tend to trust people and have lots of face-to-face interactions, you will probably assess your well-being more highly.

The deterioration of social trust affects our collective ability to withstand and rebound from disasters. Robert Putnam, world-renowned author of *Bowling Alone* and at the forefront of social capital and civic engagement research, argues that the decline of civic engagement coincides with a decline in community resilience. Putnam found that a clear division can be drawn between “civic” and “uncivic” communities, for which one of the main criteria is social trust, solidarity and tolerance. The strength of social bonds between members of the community needs to be in place before it’s tested in an emergency. Researchers found that cognitive empathy levels predict helping behavior towards victims, but Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy demonstrated that underlying issues related to lack of trust and absence of sustainable community-based engagement created significant problems in public health and aid distribution. We lightheartedly joke about whether our state could survive a zombie apocalypse, but building community resilience has become a key component of national policy across multiple federal agencies.

Empathy – the driving force behind communication and productive relationship building – is also the soul of democracy. In *Empathic Civilization*, economist Jeremy Rifkin writes, “The evolution of empathy and the evolution of democracy have gone hand in hand throughout history. The more empathetic the culture, the more democratic its values and governing institutions. The less empathetic the culture, the more totalitarian its values and governing institutions. While apparent, it’s strange how little attention has been paid to the inextricable relationship between empathic extension and democratic expansion in the study of history and evolution of governance.” Among our political leaders in the U.S., productive communication has all but broken down.

Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and a leading economist focused on implementing the Happiness Index as a global measurement of prosperity alongside the GDP, proposes an empathy-based model of policy-making, one in which we are “a complicated interplay of emotions and rational thought, unconscious and conscious decision-making, ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ thinking.” One of the primary reasons for the financial crisis of 2008 was the result of predatory lending of subprime mortgages. Participants on the banking side propped up the house of cards by deliberately misleading a vulnerable population while simultaneously hedging against its inevitable collapse, the effects of which

can still be felt today around the world. The sociopathic lack of guilt or accountability while fully understanding the harmful consequences is one of the drivers of the Occupy protests, a public expression of the need for mutually beneficial legal structures around widening socioeconomic inequality.

A restructuring of the economy from an empathetic perspective might emphasize different priorities such as stable housing, education, healthcare and infrastructure, which are crucial to the well-being of a strong middle class. Holistic approaches to our energy, water and food systems, unfettered by the current stronghold of lobbyists, might make its way to state and local levels. Instead of a slavish obsession with economics as ideology, we might consider a fair and healthy balance of how both bottom-up and top-down financial policies might co-exist for the betterment of society as a whole. Trust and engagement in our civic institutions might return. The ability to coordinate and cooperate with one another to make this vision a reality is based on our ability as community members and leaders to communicate effectively and build relationships through all levels of the process. At a societal level, experiments have indicated that empathy-induced altruism can be used to improve attitudes and actions toward stigmatized groups. Such resulting altruism has also been found to increase cooperation in competitive situations.

“WE DO NOT ACT RIGHTLY BECAUSE WE HAVE VIRTUE OR EXCELLENCE, BUT WE RATHER HAVE THOSE BECAUSE WE HAVE ACTED RIGHTLY. WE ARE WHAT WE REPEATEDLY DO. EXCELLENCE, THEN, IS NOT AN ACT BUT A HABIT.”

– Aristotle

The daily habit of relationship building is broken. People are increasingly eating alone, living alone, and participating less. Unfortunately, the way we use technology to connect to the people around us is fundamentally flawed. So how do we build better relationships and stronger networks with one another? How do we reactivate this innate but dormant foundational skill of empathy?

By going back to basics and bringing face-to-face connectivity back into our day-to-day lives. By figuring out how to shift our focus away from our devices and put our attention to the person in front of us. By recalibrating our idea of what it means to be present and engaged in the world around us. By slowing down and giving ourselves the time and space to reflect.

We can contribute to creating a healthy and productive global society by helping lay the foundation for a healthy and productive individual. Interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric. There are only three conditions that sociologists since the 1950s have considered crucial to building productive bonds: 1) proximity, 2) regular opportunities for spontaneous interactions, and 3) an environment that encourages people to relax. According to Seligman, people can improve their social skills and social networks by taking steps to increase connections with

others. This simple act, if prioritized as a regular daily habit, is all it takes to begin a potential chain of events where the upward spiral of positive emotions and increased happiness begin to naturally build momentum.

For myself, my journey has brought me to found TABLETRIBES, an information-sharing platform that facilitates opportunities for more meaningful and productive relationship building efforts. By building practical applications of social-emotional intelligence research into tools that reflect how we actually meet in the real world, our aim is to create ways to easily integrate empathy activation into daily life. There is a craving for authentic, purposeful connection, to be inspired and happy at home, work and life. While Facebook has managed to build an expansive virtual network of users that allegedly reaches almost every person on the planet as a potential touch point, we can leverage design and technology to address the needs of a globally interconnected human network on the ground.

+ BIO: HOSAN LEE

Hosan is the Founder and CEO of TABLETRIBES, an online neighborhood platform that helps mission-driven Partners, Brands, and Cities quickly mobilize offline conversations at scale around relevant topics and media content.

She specializes in building technology solutions that systematically scale empathy at the intersection of digital and physical engagement, and has been featured numerous media outlets – including the Financial Times, Fortune, and Forbes – for her work with race, empathy, and social cohesion.

Her broad interests include bridging networks across social and knowledge silos for the purpose of advancing progress and innovation in cities, thinking about the intersection of technology and humanity, and reimagining the way we interact with each other, our communities, and our local ecosystems. Hosan is a fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts and a Steering Committee Advisor of Civic Innovation Council in Washington DC.

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