

An Election on Empathy

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On November 9th, 2016, I woke up—like many others—with a profound sense of despair. The months following have been an experiment in resiliency, one that my friends and colleagues from marginalized communities have been living their entire lives. In some of my most troubled moments since the election, the thing I wish for most is merely empathy: empathy from the most privileged in our society to consider the daily lives of immigrants, Muslims, refugees, people of color, those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, queer, gender non-conforming... the list goes on.

Empathy as a concept is something that has always interested me. The questions of how and why we care about and concern ourselves with others is fascinating when you really think about it. One of my favorite books that explores this topic is a collection of essays by the author Leslie Jamison entitled “The Empathy Exams: Essays.” Jamison (2014) discusses empathy in a variety of different ways throughout her stories but, at one point, establishes a thesis about empathy as a choice: “Empathy isn’t just something that happens to us—a meteor shower of synapses firing across the brain—it’s also a choice we make: to pay attention, to extend ourselves. It’s made of exertion, that dowdier cousin of impulse” (p. 23). This is one of my favorite interpretations of empathy because it implies that true empathy is work, and hard work if we want to do it right. This election felt like an election of empathy; people were going into the polls—or not going—to decide what kind of future we wanted to give to one another. An expert much smarter than I am should probably weigh in on what people’s votes actually meant but, for the context of this article, I want to consider what the results mean for our work moving forward.

Let me acknowledge at this point in the history of our country and of our organizations, one could advocate for any one of a hundred issues as “number one priority” for the fraternal community—and they would all be right. My argument for empathy, in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, comes for a couple reasons. One, I believe to survive with our values intact, Americans have to prioritize integrity, and integrity pertains to the promise of freedom and opportunity for all. But to even attempt to grant that promise requires the empathy to see how freedom and opportunity is distributed in America. My second reason is based on the crossroads our fraternal community has been approaching for the past decade or so. The past several years have felt like an ongoing argument over our relevance as college organizations. After this election, and seeing the disconnect between privileged and marginalized communities in the United States, it is time for fraternities and sororities to decide if they will serve as a source of support for the marginalized, or as a safe house for the privileged. And at least to me, many of our organizations and communities seem more and more privileged every day.

In my opinion, it is time for our groups to decide how we define “social organization.” If our goal is to impact communities and make better men and women, empathy needs to be at the

foundation of our existence, not a byproduct of membership between individual sisters and brothers. Many of our organizations' founders started their organizations as the only source of support for their members on campus. My own organization, Sigma Kappa, was founded for the only female students on Colby College's campus because they had nowhere else to go. The power of "fraternity" or "sorority" for many groups came from giving a voice to those who were voiceless. If we don't continue to serve that purpose on campus, then we have cemented our reputation as a sort of middle ground for wealthy, white Americans before they enter the adult world. When we wonder how a nation elected a person with some racist, sexist, xenophobic views, we can point to the kinds of communities that fraternities and sororities often create on campus—ones that exclude, ones that enable, and ones that protect those who need protection the least.

As campus and organization-based professionals, I encourage you to explore the idea of empathy in your own life, and with your students. Push back on events and uses of funds that become just exercises of privilege for our students. Ask what kinds of conversations are happening inside, and outside, their chapters about the experience of different kinds of people in America. How are they extending themselves to understand the daily lives of their fellow students? Does empathy or selflessness relate to their founding or ritual? What kind of empathy or reflection or advocacy is accompanying the service projects or philanthropy events they participate in? As an advisor, how are you defining success in ways that allow them to explore this concept? What kinds of accreditation, accountability, or standards programs does your community or organization use to assess chapters? What do those standards promote? If we define success in ways that include empathy and intersectionality, we can hope to create empathy-motivated action.

Empathy in no way will solve all our problems, but it may at least get people in the same room. If I learned one thing from my own collegiate sorority experience, it's that other people's experiences matter. Hearing the stories of other women, other sisters, and other life experiences impacted me in ways I still can't totally articulate. But if empathy is a choice, we have an obligation to teach our students why it's the right choice to make.

Resources

Jamison, L. (2014). *The empathy exams: essays*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press.