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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Sarah Hochstetler for her bottomless empathy as I worked through these ideas.

Narrative

On Empathy and Appeasement

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In an effort to complicate the commonplace understanding of empathy as an uncomplicated good, the author draws on her experience of sibling abuse to distinguish between empathy and appeasement. Because both rely on perspective-taking, empathy and appeasement are often conflated, but this essay demonstrates the importance of recognizing that empathy originates in courage and appeasement in fear. Abuse victims will recognize this important difference quickly enough; we need others espousing the value of empathy to recognize the difference as well.

It has taken me years to distinguish between empathy and appeasement, in no small part because empathy has been sold to us as an uncomplicated good. President Obama tells us that one of the biggest problems with this country is that we suffer from an empathy deficit. We need more people who can understand what it's like to walk for a while in other people's shoes. As a professor of English, I'm aware of concerns and debates scholars and teachers engage in regarding whether reading literature teaches students to feel empathy. *Can empathy be taught?* Empathy is conceptualized as a substance that we always need more of, a substance we have depleted and need to refill by reading, a substance that can lubricate the mechanics of social life in these troubled times. Leslie Jamison's beautiful book, *The Empathy Exams*, won the Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize and was a *New York Times* Book Review Editor's Choice in 2014, and rightly so, for it is nuanced, complex, thoughtful, surprising, and at every turn intellectually stimulating. Empathy, Jamison tells us, "comes from the Greek *empathēia*—*em* (into) and *pathos* (feeling)—a penetration, a kind of travel. It suggests you enter another person's pain as you'd enter another country, through immigration and customs, border crossing by way of query: *What grows where you are? What are the laws? What animals graze there?*" (6). Jamison also writes, "Empathy isn't just listening, it's asking the questions whose answers need to be listened to. Empathy requires inquiry as much as imagination. Empathy requires knowing you know nothing. Empathy requires acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see" (5).

We haven't done much work, though, to contextualize empathy. Not all empathy is the same. Empathy for your friend with cancer is not the same and does not have the same moral complexity as empathy for the person who is abusing you.

*

The sheets on my bed are light brown with letters spelling *sleeeeeeeep* all over them in a dark brown whimsical font. *Sleeeeeeeep*, they're telling me, but all I can do is lie in bed and wonder why everybody hates me. I feel trapped in this room. It's my new room. The old room was downstairs in the new addition that was built onto the house when I was born. I moved upstairs when my new stepfather, Warren, moved in. Warren is my mother's second husband, the man who I imagined would one day become my new daddy after my real daddy died when I was four years old. My new bedroom is upstairs with Susie and Margie's and Guy and Timmy's rooms. Guy and Timmy share a room with bunk beds. Susie and Margie share the room next to mine, and the house is configured so that to get to their room, they have to go through mine—just a few steps, but enough to make me feel like I can never really shut the door or shut them out. My door is always open. Actually, all three bedrooms upstairs are connected. Inside Susie and Margie's room is a door that leads to Guy and Timmy's room, but it wouldn't make sense for the girls to walk all the way through the boys' room to get to theirs, not when it's so much easier to walk just a few steps through mine.

Bedtime. Margie, five years older than me, walks through to her room. "You little shit. You're dead."

Middle of the night. Margie walks back through to the one bathroom in the house. "Little fucker. Fat shit."

Back to her room. "Skank."

Morning. "You're dead, you little fuck."

I get up, go to the bathroom, shut and lock the door behind me. I check the linen closet (which, for a very long time I understood as "living closet," like living room) to be sure she's not in there. She's done it to me before. I was sitting on the toilet doing my business when she jumped out of the linen closet and screamed at me. I cried. I was eight years old.

I brush my teeth and contemplate once again rolling deodorant on her toothbrush. All I want is for her to die. All I want is to be an only child. Deodorant didn't do it last time. I'll try my mother's perfume. Surely that's gotta kill her or at least make her very sick. Sick enough to leave me alone.

*

At night sometimes I try to suffocate myself with my pillow. I lie on my back with my pillow over my head and push down as hard as I can until it hurts and I have to take it away.

"Fat fucking shit."

Or I lie on my stomach with my face squished into my pillow, hoping no air could make its way in.

"Stupid fucker. I'll kill you."

I trace the letters on my sheets. Sllleeeeeeeeeeep.

“Piece of shit.”

I lie in bed and cry and wonder why everybody hates me.

“Fat bitch.”

*

I’m sitting at the kitchen table reading one of Ma’s magazines and eating my cereal. Margie comes down the stairs. It’s early. She walks by me on the way to the cereal cabinet and punches me in the arm. “Ow!” I yell. It fucking hurts. And I yell. But nobody really hears me. After a while I stop reacting. Sometimes I wish she *would* just kill me. What’s stopping her, really?

*

She’s always hitting me for no reason, punching my arm or my stomach and I cry out for my mother and my mother tells me to stay away from her, to go do something else. She threatens to kill me always, telling me that as soon as Ma left, I’m dead. I fear for my life before I can walk to school alone.

*

When I lie in bed coughing, unable to sleep because of a cold, I hear her in the next room yelling at me. “You little fucker, shut *up!*”

*

On the first of every month, Ma gets her Social Security check in the mail. She hates for it to be late because of a holiday and she hates when the mail comes late on the first because our regular mailman has the day off or because he’s simply late. She stands at the front door staring out, looking for him. Then she looks at the clock and swears. She wants to get it before lunch so we can go to Friendly’s.

Before she pays any of the bills or goes to the grocery store, Ma takes me to the mall. We park at JCPenney’s—far from the door and when I complain Ma tells me I have two legs. Use them. At Penney’s Ma buys herself a couple new tops and lets me go to Esprit or G. Fox to get a new sweatshirt or a new pair of shoes. I love showing up to school on Monday with a new sweatshirt. It signifies that I’m cool, I’m loved, and my mother has enough money to buy me new things.

When we get home from the mall, we to leave the bags in the trunk until Margie is out of the house. Ma doesn’t want Margie to see the things she bought for me. This probably saves me from a beating.

*

Margie's twenty-two and pregnant from the boyfriend who beats her. She's moved back in with Ma in order to get away from him. She's back in her old room upstairs, the one connected to mine. She still verbally attacks me every time she walks through.

I'm seventeen at this point. My boyfriend Michael is over the house and we're playing cards at the kitchen table. Margie comes into the kitchen from the living room and calls me a bitch. I tell her to shut up. Six months pregnant, she hits me. I get up to get away from her and she chases me around the kitchen table trying to grab me so she can kick me. "Are you gonna kick your baby, too?" I say, disgusted. She doesn't get me that time, but if you thought she'd grown out of it, you'd be wrong.

*

I understand now that Margie did what she did to me out of fear and insecurity, out of a desperate need for discipline and care. I understand that she had the same mother I had, the same mother who was terribly depressed, a mother who had never worked through her grief or perhaps knew that she could. Ma told me to stay away from her, so I tried. I was a kid. I believed that if I did what my mother told me to do, I might be okay.

But those four words. Those four words did so much.

Stay away from her.

Here's what they did: Those four words moved me to take on Margie's perspective on the world rather than develop one of my own. They told me that the perspective that mattered in my home was *hers*. The world that mattered, the comfort that mattered was *hers*. My mother told me to identify with my abuser, to make her world safe, to keep her from getting upset, so that maybe, just maybe, things can remain calm on the surface.

Inside, though, you're a mess. Your stomach turns and your bowels rumble. You're shaking. You're never calm because you never know if you're doing it right. Living. Loving. Seeing. Am I seeing the world right? Will you protect me if I identify with my abuser? Will you love me if I appease her?

*

Appeasement. Not empathy. Appeasement and empathy share the practice of adopting another's perspective, but their crucial differences need articulation in a culture far too tempted to conflate them. For evidence of such temptation, see any recent discussion asking rape victims to forgive their rapists.

In his work on PTSD, psychologist Chris Cantor complicates the simplistic and commonplace understanding of reactions to threat that we're all familiar with: fight or flight. Instead, Cantor argues that people employ six specific defenses undertaken "in a specific sequence: avoidance, attentive

immobility, withdrawal, aggressive defense, appeasement, and tonic immobility” (1040).

Appeasement, Cantor writes, “is primarily a defense for conspecific encounters with more dominant individuals. It involves pacification, conciliation, and submission” (1040).

When faced with a threat by a more dominant member of one’s own species—as in any case of child abuse—the child can try to avoid the abuser (defense 1); she can stand very still, regulate her breathing, and hope not to be noticed (defense 2); she cannot, if she lives in the same home as the abuser, withdraw from the abusive situation (defense 3); she can hardly form an aggressive defense (defense 4); but she *can* try to appease her abuser (defense 5).

In my situation, appeasing my abuser meant doing as my mother told me: staying away from Margie. It meant understanding that the person in the home to appease was Margie. How did she like things to be? That’s how things would be.

“De-escalation is one of appeasement’s core functions,” writes Cantor (1042). Indeed, to be made responsible for de-escalation was also to be made responsible for escalation. All Margie would have to do would be to say, “She came near me.”

Appeasement is a reaction to fear. Appeasement requires perspective-taking, an ability to walk in another person’s shoes.

*

Let nobody tell you that the reach of abuse is not long and far. I struggle with empathy: with having too much of it, with knowing who to give it to, with losing myself in it.

When I was supposed to be developing a perspective on the world and my place in it, I was instead mired in an abusive situation in which I was being taught that appeasement was the way to keep myself safe. It didn’t work. But it was the only strategy I was offered. So I used it. I tried to stay away from Margie. I tried to think about her needs. When I sneezed, I did so quietly. She still told me to shut the fuck up. I tried to take up as little space as possible. I tried to make her world quiet and peaceful and it never worked. She still beat me up every chance she got.

As an adult, making friends has sometimes been difficult because I don’t know who I can give my empathy to. My history of sibling abuse makes me a very good friend in that I’m incredibly empathetic. I can anticipate another person’s needs sometimes before they can. I know just what gift will make them laugh out loud. I give and give and most of my friends give back.

But in the last five years I’ve had to reassess and abandon more than one friendship. “We should empathize from courage, is the point,” writes Jamison, “and it makes me think about how much of my empathy comes from fear. I’m afraid other people’s problems will happen to me, or else I’m afraid other people will stop loving me if I don’t adopt their problems as my own” (22). I’ve had to reassess those friendships because I realized that I was empathizing not from courage or friendship

but from fear that if I didn't adopt their problems as my own they would no longer love me. Empathizing from fear is not empathizing at all. It's appeasement. Appeasement is an attempt to de-escalate. Appeasement is a response to what you know, deep down, could escalate in ways you've experienced before. Appeasement is a reaction to a lopsided relationship, one in which one person does all the work of anticipating the other's needs.

Appeasement is a reaction to predators.

Empathy is listening, asking questions, imagining, knowing you can't know just how the other person feels. Empathy is caring safely because you trust you'll be cared for, too. Empathy is not something you can be shamed into.

But appeasement is.

Appeasement can be taught. It is taught every single day to victims of abuse who are later taught that perspective-taking is a valued intellectual and emotional skill. We call it empathy.

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