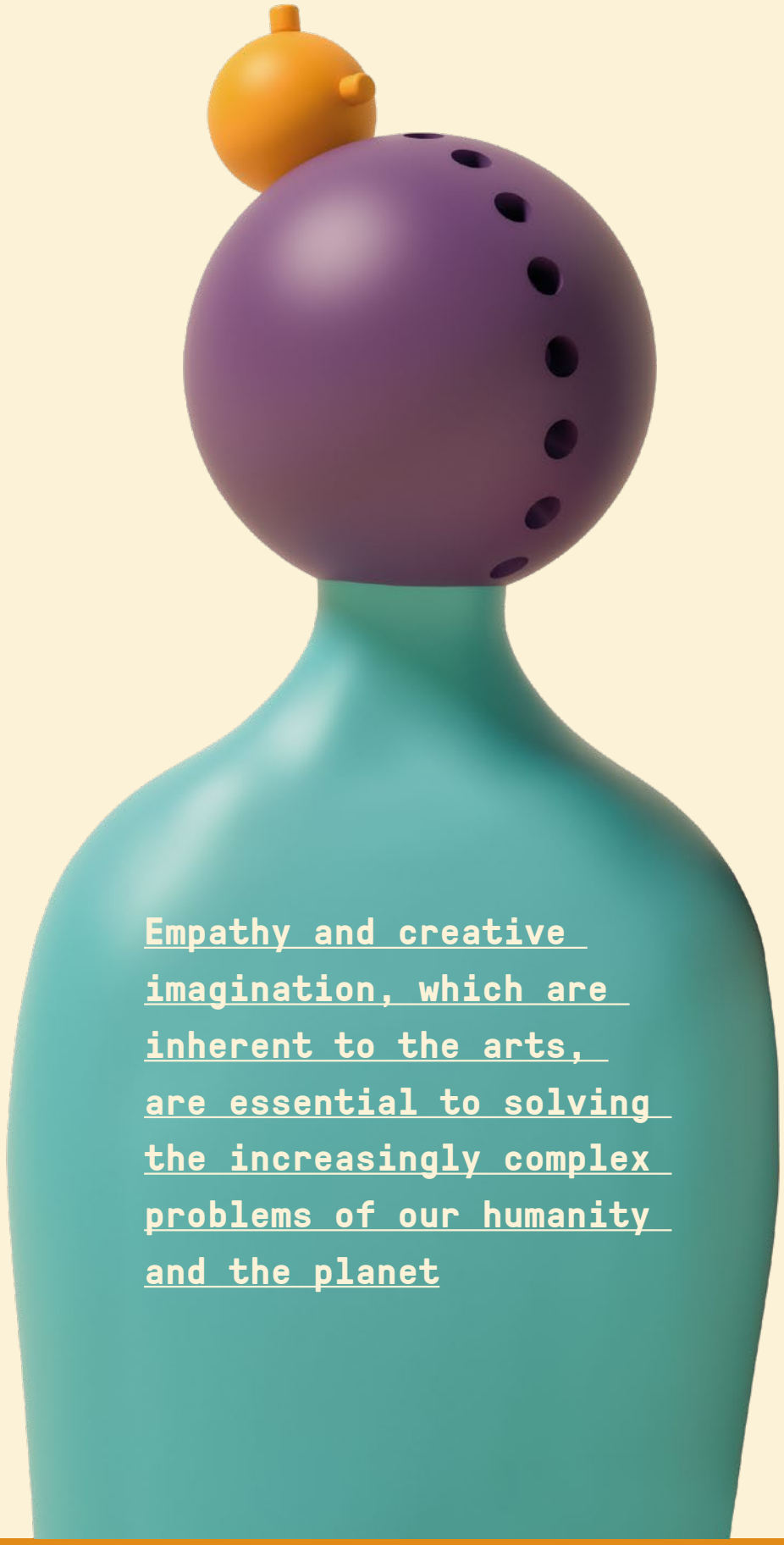

Empathy and creative imagination, which are inherent to the arts, are essential to solving the increasingly complex problems of our humanity and the planet

# HOLDING SPACE FOR EMPATHY AND CREATIVE IMAGINATION:

## THE ROLE OF ARTS CENTERS, MUSEUMS, AND OTHER INFORMAL LEARNING PLATFORMS

Elif M. Gokcigdem

ONE: Organization of Networks for Empathy, USA

There is an increasing awareness that the complex problems facing humanity and the planet require more than academic knowledge and technical abilities. Empathy, creative thinking, emotional literacy, and communication skills, as well as filtering our actions through a compassionate worldview lie at the heart of any sustainable solutions.

At any given time and place, there are multiple ways of looking at and seeing a particular object, issue, or problem, as well as many ways that beings coexist and make sense of the universe. Informal learning platforms, including arts centers and museums that encourage us to understand, emotionally engage with, and contemplate this profound truth help us to become more responsive to the needs of those around us and of our environment. They can help us gain a perspective transforming lens that awakens our sense of connectedness to the Whole —all of humanity and the planet, through empathy.

Twenty years ago, at the turn of the millennium, the United Nations expressed determination to collectively solve many of our global development problems such as poverty, hunger, access to healthcare and education, economic inequality, and environmental sustainability. The fact that we continue to struggle to solve our increasingly complex problems might be an indication that perhaps it is not only a matter of lack of resources, but also our prevailing ego-centric worldviews that hold us back. It is critical to understand the forces that can cause us to shift our focus from our individual or in-group trenches, and instead inspire us to work collaboratively toward our collective wellbeing. Empathy, our inherent ability to feel the emotions of another, lies at the heart of those forces.

An understanding of the potential of empathy would help us explore it for its social applications as a perception altering lens with "triple-focus." Seeing the world through a lens of empathy allows us to face our own internal world of emotions, our ability or lack of ability to empathize, as well as our biases; so that we may recognize them in others around us; and finally, expand our circle of concern from those who are immediately around us to all of humanity including those others who we may never encounter, as well as the environment with all of its living and non-living beings.

The first step to disrupting our pattern of chronic empathy-deficit requires no less than undergoing a profound shift in perspective. This kind of cataclysmic shift can be caused by a major life-changing event such as giving birth or almost dying, or through the overview effect experienced by astronauts which results in a sense of awe and wonder and being a part of something greater than one's self. It can also be achieved

when one is faced with a major, real-life dilemma, requiring an immediate reprioritization of what is essential in life. At times like these we are forced to create new rules and paradigms to make sense of our existence within a completely new scenario.

In our global society, the time for such a perspective shift is now. We need to move from an ego-centric view of existence to a unifying worldview that values the wellbeing of all of humanity, the environment, and the planet's life supporting resources.

Although empathy is a vital element of our nature, our civilization has not created the essential spaces, practices, and supporting ecosystems where it can be intentionally nurtured

This is where arts centers and museums have a responsibility. Empathy and creative imagination, which are inherent to the arts, are essential to solving the increasingly complex problems of our humanity and the planet. They are also at the heart of positive behavior change, as well as how we make meaning, and find purpose in life through acts of compassion and altruism. As informal learning platforms, arts centers and museums are our civic commons and safe spaces uniquely equipped to encourage visitors to imagine, explore and experience our rich human heritage and our natural world firsthand. They have the capability to bring together different disciplines such as the arts, technology, and sciences to show how all living things are interconnected. By providing a safe space for dialogue, experiential learning, storytelling, awe and wonder, and contemplation, arts centers, museums, and other informal learning platforms are uniquely positioned to empower individuals to discover, ignite, and exercise their creative imagination and empathy towards positive personal, environmental and societal progress.

## CAN EMPATHY BE AN INTENTIONAL OUTCOME OF A MUSEUM EXPERIENCE?

Although empathy is a vital element of our nature, our civilization has not created the essential spaces, practices, and supporting ecosystems where it can be intentionally nurtured and unleashed towards the greater good. Yet research suggests that empathy can be taught, and that contact with people who are different from us in a safe, empathic way is a first step (De Waal, 2010; Keltner, 2009; Konrath, 2013).

With these thoughts in mind, in 2015, I reached out to different types of museums to find out how museums were identifying empathy, and whether they were considering it as an intentional outcome of a museum experience. The fifteen case-studies in *Fostering Empathy Through Museums* (Gokcigdem, 2016), revealed that there were three main avenues through which museums were thinking and employing empathy:

- As an institutional value that permeates the entire spectrum of a museum's operations from acquisitions to hiring,
- As an educational tool to design better exhibitions and programs with the specific goal of educating the public about a museum's collection and contents,
- As a human phenomenon, a life skill, and an intentional outcome of a museum experience that is worthy of exploration on its own.

While all of these avenues offer their own challenges and rewards, and are equally important, the least explored path, and the subject of this chapter is the third one: where, museums intentionally design experiences that foster empathy as a life skill. In this way, the museum isn't attempting to educate on a factual topic, but in-

stead enabling self-knowledge: an awareness of our ability to imagine what it is like to be another, our selfish and not-so-selfish tendencies, how we make meaning, and through which lens we make our everyday choices.

Empowering individuals to explore their own emotions and examine how they intersect with those of other people is more critical than ever. Three examples particularly stand out on this path:

1 A partnership between the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the Botin Center in Spain offers a new way of engaging with art objects that emphasizes goals of emotional literacy, perspective taking, and creative thinking.

2 In Exploratorium's *Science of Sharing* exhibition, participatory engagement and social inquiry takes center-stage as individuals experience perspective change, participate in meaningful, yet playful dialogue, and learn the importance and implications of their choices in a safe, social setting.

3 In Dialogue Social Enterprise's immersive and truly perspective-shifting experiences of *Dialogue in Dark*, *Dialogue in Silence*, and *Dialogue with Time*, the visitor is both the subject and the object of the experiences.

These three examples are the results of multidisciplinary collaboration and scientific research, and collectively offer decades of wealth in terms of evidence-based ideas, tools, and insights from different countries and cultural contexts that could be further developed and adapted for a variety of informal learning settings.

*Fostering Empathy Through Museums* also brought attention to five common qualities that position museums as uniquely equipped platforms that can foster empathy (Gokcigdem, 2017):

1 **Holding a mirror to society:**
Through their social and educational mission, museums can provide a safe space for encountering our collective behavior, knowledge, complex histories, and values. By putting people in proximity to other people's lived experiences, the artifacts from their cultures, and their stories, museums can help us awaken to different realities and multiple perspectives that exist around us.

Museums can help us awaken to different realities and multiple perspectives that exist around us

2 **Storytelling and creating new narratives about our interconnectedness:**
Storytelling inspires empathy-building by allowing us to engage emotionally with the experiences of other people, even those with whom we may have little in common. Museums offer stories of people and places far away in place, time, or experience, in order to encourage understanding, empathy-building and more wide-ranging compassion. Telling stories from the point of view of the people and cultures featured can also increase our sense of shared humanity, as we see how others face fears, biases, and challenges similar to our own.

3 **Experiential learning through immersive experiences:**
To increase empathy, it helps not only to provide knowledge and stories, but to create experiences that engage us in other ways. Experiential learning is an effective way to increase learning in general, and empathy in particular. Museums help us to experience empathy by offering interactive exhibits that encourage more than an intellectual understanding. We often learn better when we are engaged with all of our senses; so providing sensory-rich experiences—or, sometimes,

strategically limiting our access to them to help us realize how much they shape our experience of the world—allows us to imagine different ways of being, which can help deepen the lessons of empathy imparted by museums.

Museums encourage contemplation of our world by providing a space where we can slow down and be with what is before us, without needing to perform in any way

4 **Offering experiences of awe and wonder:** How might one go about changing habitual and entrenched perspectives and behavior toward others? This usually requires more than just information; it requires some kind of paradigm shift, often caused by a transformative life event or some kind of deep learning. For example, think of the "overview effect," experienced by astronauts seeing our planet from outer space for the first time. This experience induces a strong sense of awe, connectedness to something greater than themselves, and compassion for the whole planet. Museums can also foster experiences of awe and wonder, through art, science, spectacle, beauty, and complexity. Since awe has been tied to a sense of oneness with others and altruism, a museum's ability to foster awe can also help with the goal of increasing empathy and compassion.

5 **Being places of contemplation:** Museums encourage contemplation of our world by providing a space where we can slow down and be with what is before us, without needing to perform in any way. Unlike many everyday settings where the goal is clear, people are invited to explore in museums on their own schedule, moving from exhibit to exhibit as they see fit, following their own internal guidelines. This naturally allows for a more contemplative and reflective experience. Through this reflection, museum patrons can achieve a deeper understanding of the viewpoints of others and recognize their own connection to all of humanity and the planet.

## THE ALCHEMY OF EMPATHY

Designing informal learning platforms as "empathy gyms" (Zaki, 2019) —places that foster empathy as an intentional outcome in service of the greater good, requires an intentional approach. It also requires a deep exploration of our understanding what empathy is and what we wish for it to accomplish for our humanity and the planet. It is essential for these empathy gyms to allow their participants to tryout a new lens through which they can explore our interconnected universe.

My recent book: "Designing for Empathy: Perspectives on the Museum Experience" (Gokcigdem, 2019), proposes a new conceptual framework for looking at empathy through the lens of the "Alchemy of Empathy" —a list of ingredients that are known to create transformative perspective shift. This volume, comprising of twenty-three chapters contributed by multidisciplinary experts, poses three essential questions:

1 **What is the "object" of our empathy; how do we define and perceive the "other"?** This question invites us to explore how our perception of the "other" might be filtered through the heart, brain, conscious experience, through our worldviews, as well as via artificial intelligence, and augmented and virtual reality experiences that might soon become a part of our natural sensory systems like sight, hearing, touch and smell.

Our individual predispositions such as our physiology and simply how our brains are wired, combined with socially constructed worldviews, opinions, expectations, and paradigms affect how we perceive the other. Our view of the other, in turn, calibrates our atti-

tudes towards people, the environment, and even our virtual communities. What are some of the filters that we use to view the other? When we look through them, how might these filters, such as a human heart or spirituality, brain, consciousness, a worldview, and altered realities affect our perception of the other? An understanding of these filters, how they are formed, and how we use them might be a good start to help us identify and remove bias and manipulation from our systems.

Empathy is anchored deep in our humanness. It is an innate survival skill that can be nurtured

2 **The Alchemy of Empathy: What are some of those ingredients that we often intuitively know that result in transformational experiences of perspective shift and empathy?** Empathy is anchored deep in our humanness. It is an innate survival skill that can be nurtured toward more nuanced and sophisticated levels of understanding of our place within the universe. To better explore the qualities of empathy, we need to go beyond conventional knowledge, and bring to table all types of knowing, knowledge, wisdom, and resources that our humanity can offer. *Designing for Empathy* presents a list that is titled the "Alchemy of Empathy," which includes: Intentionality, Intersectionality, Curiosity, Play, Vulnerability, Contemplation and Nuance, Proximity, Storytelling, Synchronicity, Awe and Wonder, Collective Journeying, Breaking Bread, Optimism and Hope...

An ability to identify and name these (and, other) ingredients, discover their scientific basis and their origins in our evolution, while observing how they perform on their own and collectively, their pitfalls and potential, can open up new pathways in design. When studying the case studies representing these ingredients, one quickly realizes that, they are fluid like drops of water, where each drop harbors many qualities. One might encounter elements of vulnerability in play, and play in curiosity; or, awe in vulnerability, and vulnerability in proximity. They are also most potent when used in a variety of combinations vs. individually.

3 **What are the Scope and the Spectrum of our Empathy? The importance of positioning empathy as a cross-industrial shared value for the benefit of people and the planet.** Lack of empathy is a public health issue that permeates all aspects of our lives. When there is lack of empathy, its symptoms are manifested through individuals, institutions, societies and the environment. If one finger has a splinter, the entire body suffers. The ecosystem empathy requires for its nurturing should also be all encompassing. Perspective change, and attaining an empathic worldview or mindset that cares for the wellbeing of all, are not an on/off switch. Nurturing empathy and caring mindsets take time, strategy, effortful thinking, and constant nurturing by authentic role models and values lived and expressed in everyday life and through a multitude of platforms. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a collective innovation strategy supported by multidisciplinary research and collaboration. Exploring the scope and the spectrum of empathy allows us to take a closer look at the potential of empathy in shaping our institutions and systems, values and ethics, as well as influencing education, entrepreneurship, design and innovation, and societal progress.

The ideas and findings in this paper are work in progress. Empathy-Building Through Museums Initiative is the overarching platform where this work takes place in the format of books, workshops, seminars, and summits. As we grow more sophisticated in our understanding and deployment of empathy, we extend our healing solutions to all of humanity and the planet.

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