

## USING EMPATHY TO CROSS THE SEA OF HUMANITY

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This piece shares our story/ies of how empathy as a cultural process has created a bond between us, scientist-practitioners from opposite sides of the globe. We met in a conference room on the Penn Campus in early 2019. Our Chief Learning Officer doctoral program and professional experiences would, over time, alter the way we--as individuals and as a pair--experienced a life-changing pandemic and how we experienced its impact on our relationship. Our past journeys gave us different lenses to view the health pandemic and the social pandemic. However, through our conversations, we came to realize that the empathy we felt for each other would rewire our brains to bond us, quite powerfully, across more than just the oceans that separated us geographically--through the sea of humanity that embeds and surrounds us.

Through the COVID-19 pandemic, we worked together to contribute to our field of expertise in organizational learning, talent development, and change management, with emphasis in the cultural influence of change. We were searching for ways to make sense of the chaos occurring around the world, and in our worlds, in efforts to help people navigate through their suffering, and to help to bring back the hope of a changed future.

We brought a variety of unique experiences to our problem-solving activities together as an industrial-organizational psychologist and military veteran. Jo served the nation by specializing in Search and Rescue Operations during her time in the United States Coast Guard. As an experienced professional in corporate culture and talent development, Jane has worked in multiple countries and conducted organizational development programs at a global level. Our combined and intersecting expertises helped us to make meaning around our own experiences during the pandemic, and this shed light on the power of empathy and compassion.

Research shows that humans are highly prosocial and able to share in the experience of others through empathy and compassion. Feedback generated from feeling empathy and sympathy can change neural networks of the brain, and over time, these neural changes can accumulate and make noticeable changes, causing a shift from self-interest to prosocial behavior. Although all cultures have unique beliefs and practices, there are, we see, some common elements that penetrate through this diversity (Kitayama & Salvador, 2017), meaning that people can feel empathy and compassion towards people of different cultures and backgrounds.

The health and social pandemics show that the world needs to make remarkable changes. Although our differences may block us in many ways, we can reconnect through empathy and compassion to make all of the necessary changes together.

### Jo's early experiences at the Training Center

I was sent to school to learn how to become one of America's most exceptional first responders. The Search and Rescue Communications School and Health Service-EMT training schools are located on the same military base in Northern California. The U.S. Coast Guard refers to such bases as Training Centers. Together, military students spend half of a year or longer away from their families and loved ones. In return, the students become our own and each others' support system. We pull together and become a family, we eat together, sleep in the same barracks together, study together. It is quite usual to find us in the common areas, staying up for countless hours helping each other prepare for the exams we need to pass prior to graduation or certification. For some, the time we spend in school creates a lifelong bond that spans our entire military career and beyond. After graduation, assignments are provided to duty stations all over the U.S. and the world. To perform various sea search and rescue operations, I was given my top pick and was sent across the country to the East Coast. I landed at a high-tempo operational unit and specialized in communications for maritime port security operations and search and rescue operations and planning.

### Jane's early experience at Penn

I vividly remember my first day of arriving in Philadelphia, after flying a whole day from the Eastern World to the United States. Excited and nervous, I opened the door to the room full of professionals: Jo was one of them. The group of people hailed from all over the United States, and across the world, gathered together to learn and transform themselves. These people, with abundant experience in various fields shared one passion: learning and development. There was a wide age span in the group, from people in their 30s to those in their 60s. The group was always dynamic and lively, the room buzzed with energy and

passion. People were open and curious, wanting to be students again, enjoying the moments of being back in school after a decade or so or more. I felt proud to belong to this group. This positive Penn experience was one of the reasons why I felt hopeful when hearing the surprising news that my family would move to the U.S. due to a new job assignment.

### **The arrival of the pandemic, a sea of crying people**

Jo and her former rescue colleagues often kept in touch with hopes of being able to see each other again one day. However, the day they planned their usual chat session ended up being a very unusual day for Jo once she turned on the news. The news story was about the "sea of people" who gathered in protests. Those whose voices cried out for the lives of those lost, a cry that was all too familiar to Jo: the sound of distress, of pain, of loss. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Jo had a lot of time to reflect on the countless number of SAR cases she worked over the years. During her career, she has heard the voices of people who cry out for help in their gravest times of distress and pain. Some of their gut-wrenching cries she will never forget. The public usually references the military culture of bravery that is required to do these rescues, but, if you ask Jo, she references the empathy that it takes. Kitayama and Salvador (2017) reference neuroscience as an approach to cultural psychology whereby empathy may be used to form understanding of the differences and similarities between people. It takes a lot of empathy and compassion to be dedicated to a career that requires all you have, everyday. In turn, Jo could feel and see how empathy rewired her brain to make it possible to serve others, in this way, for almost a decade. While there wasn't an empathy course in her training, being so emotionally moved on a constant basis, gave new meaning to how she valued every human's life whose voice cried out from the sea.

### **Drifting lonely in the sea, the isolated island**

Due to a work assignment, Jane arrived in the United States with her family right at the moment the US responded to COVID-19 pandemic with shelter-in-place orders. Everything changed right after their arrival in the United States in fact. The world shut down around them before they even had a chance to get settled or to blend in. They had no access to society: no school, no playground, no neighborhood, no church, no other people, nothing. They were like islands floating lonely in the middle of a vast sea. Jane felt bewildered at first, and after a diminishing incident in which a group of teens yelled "CoronaVirus!" at her on the street, she contracted.

Not wanting to add anymore anxiety to their new community, her family contracted and covered themselves as much as they could, limiting their exposures and covering-up their identities in necessary disclosures. They spoke English in public, including on their patio at their homes. Jane's first weeks in her new place were shaped by how she did not belong, quite different from what she had experienced in Philadelphia as a new student. It is like Waheed (2019) writes, "Some people when they hear your story contract. Others upon hearing expand. And this is how you know." In fact, Jane saw the ways that her new neighbors contracted, and this was how she knew, knew what she needed to do to stay safe, or at least to feel an illusion of safety amidst the weaponized racism aimed at them. However, feeling illusionary safety took a great toll on her: numbing her emotions. As Miller (2007) puts it, Jane "went down to the lost world of feelings, unable to experience the feelings of her own."

### **The only thing that matters at sea**

While talking with Jane about the racist slurs she experienced, Jo felt the deep sorrow and suffering of her colleague. Jo began reflecting with Jane on her military years and within these conversations, the two of us shared a realization. Jo had never given a thought about the race, ethnicity, gender, of anyone who was rescued. Her rescue team did not use those identity markers as a deciding factor on how well a mission was executed. The rescue team gave their all, every time, for all who need their rescue efforts. The teams of people Jo honorably served with are the most exceptional people she knows. During a rescue, the team moves as one, similar to gears in a watch, they answer the call of help with synchronous precision to locate and rescue those in distress—those who depend on them—as one body. The rescue team accepts that responsibility with honor, knowing that their only duty is the safety of life at sea. In those moments, the only thing that matters is reaching out to the voice in pain, and saving their life, ending their distress. Jo recognized that being a compassionate listener to Jane made their working relationship stronger, but empathizing together made them friends, and learning from Jane made Jo a better person and leader. We both realized that we can traverse this sea of difference to connect.

### **A truth that connects us**

Days of extreme woe repeated over and over for Jane as she stayed at home with her family, trying to focus on her daily routines. It was as if she was living inside the walls made of her narratives, saying, 'We, the sojourners, wouldn't invade your lives, please don't harm ours.' Until that one day while overcome with distress, Jane turned on the T.V. and watched the horrific scene that happened in Kentucky, where Brianna Taylor, a female EMT was shot during an inhome raid. "How can this happen while you are sleeping at your own house? And she was a first responder who saved lives, just like Jo!" Jane murmured in shock.

This shock broke down the walls of alienation and the suppressed emotions flooded in. It was a wake-up call to face reality. The reality that Jane's walls and contractions would not protect her or her family from the challenges surrounding them. The sadness, anger, and helplessness that covered the nation were not foreign to her own emotions and experiences in fact. The

hurt of feeling excluded, judged, and not welcomed that she had experienced in life linked her back to the world that surrounded her. Jane's emotions flowed again, moving in line with what was going on around her, emergent. Jane gradually regained her sense of feeling connected, as she had felt at Penn earlier on, engaged, a sense of being seen and belonging to a community. Jane realized how her narrow "us versus them" lens was not going to be useful because people's experiences have too many things in common to focus on the divergences and differences. Jane became aware that the common emotions we feel as humans cut across the variabilities among people, and it's the essence that connects people, this helped her to see the truth that connects us.

### **Moving beyond what divides us**

Through connecting over their lived experiences, Jane recognized that we sometimes are tempted to contract and alienate ourselves from others and build a wall that would divide us to feel safe, which is illusional. This kind of "us versus them" mentality that labels people and places us into categories can be evoked when people experience trauma, such as in times of crisis. However, this is an illusion we create, because being alive means experiencing life, and "my" experiences cannot be separated from "your" experiences; they move and dance and glide in the water together, they swim. While individual experiences are unique and have different colors and textures, still, being human, we are embedded in the broader experience of humanity, that we all have the power to influence, drops and waves in a sea of humanity.

While Jo and Jane have lived different lives, in different countries, and each has a unique story, this pandemic has revealed to us how we belong to the same ocean of humanity. Our shared reflections and ability to use empathy to connect us towards a shared future we are shaping together within our personal and professional lives.

### **About Jo and Jane:**

Jomauree 'Jo' Wynter is an I-O Psychologist who leads implementation efforts for human capital centered, change management initiatives. As a proud military veteran and doctoral candidate in Penn GSE's CLO Executive Doctoral Program, Jo's research focuses on the leadership trajectories of Senior-Level Female Military Officers, in V.U.C.A settings.

Chungueun' Jane' Kim is from South Korea and recently relocated to the U.S. after 2 years in Malaysia. Her expertise is in talent development, corporate culture, and organizational development, with experiences conducting global organizational development projects in seven countries. Jane is a Doctoral Student in the Penn GSE's CLO Executive Doctoral Program.

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