

# The Art of Empathic Individuality

*Michael Howard*

**B**ecause the world economy is so hyper-competitive, much of the focus in education these days, from Singapore to Shanghai to American schools, is on STEM—science, technology, engineering, and math. As important as that is, it is shortsighted. We need to add the empathetic reasoning of the arts to the mix—STEAM. ... *Empathetic thinking* is something that is severely missing in education today.

– “Behind the Cello,” an interview with Yo Yo Ma posted online 01/21/2014

## Art and education

Yo Yo Ma is not simply advocating for more art in the curriculum. He is pointing to a new educational paradigm in which the focus is less on mastering subject content and more on developing fundamental human capacities. Yo Yo Ma calls for the arts to be regarded as core disciplines because they develop essential human qualities: *empathic reasoning/thinking, collaboration, flexible thinking, disciplined imagination, and being innovative and creative.*

Yo Yo Ma is not alone in advocating that education develop empathy. The number of books published and organizations founded in the last few years dedicated to fostering empathy is quite striking. The proliferation of all these efforts is an encouraging sign that the goals of education are shifting toward developing the full spectrum of human capacities.

Some artists and art teachers see the role that art can play in developing empathy, but such efforts represent only the beginning of a more full and concrete elaboration of how the arts foster empathy. This essay is offered as a contribution toward furthering this task.

As a starting point, let us compare the capacities developed through the sciences to those developed through the arts. I frame this comparison in terms of different modes of perception, thinking, feeling, and acting:

### SCIENCES:

Exact, *quantitative* perception—measure, count and weigh  
Analytical, logical, mathematical thinking  
Feelings have no place in striving for objective knowledge  
Mechanical methods and processes

### ARTS:

Exact, *qualitative* perception  
Synthetic, living, intuitive thinking  
Feelings are transformed into an organ for experiencing objective qualities  
Organic methods and processes

## To civilize is to empathize

Most people are surprised to learn that the word “empathy” appeared only in the first decade of the 20th century. As words tend to be coined as the need arises to describe a new insight or experience, we have reason to ask whether empathy is a relatively new experience. The evidence suggests it is both old and new.

In his book, *The Empathic Civilization*, Jeremy Rifkin offers this view:

Civilization is the detribalization of blood ties and the resocialization of distinct individuals based on associational ties. Empathic extension is the psychological mechanism that makes this conversion and transition possible. When we say to civilize we mean to empathize. (p.24)

A good half of Rifkin's book outlines in considerable detail the ten-thousand-year history of human civilization as a slow but sure process in which human beings have expanded their capacity to empathize. He paints a vivid picture of the rise of cities and the significant increase this brought in the number of people interacting with one another as compared to nomadic tribes. Besides the purely quantitative rise in the number of people living together in cities, and gradually over the whole earth, the course of human history has also brought an increasing diversification in the values and ways people live and work.

Empathy begins within the family, such as a mother's capacity to feel the needs of her child. This feeling for the other expands naturally to all those who share a common way of life—those of one's clan, tribe, and nation. However, there is a qualitative difference between identifying with those who are similar to oneself and identifying with those who are significantly different from oneself.

In the last hundred years alone, we have become a global village that has grown from one to seven billion inhabitants. In the same time period, our methods of transportation and communication have brought us into direct or indirect contact with many more people who are very different from us. The emergence of the word *empathy* is an indicator that already early in the 20th century people sensed the approach of a new era in which our ability to understand and get along with other human beings would be challenged both quantitatively and qualitatively as never before—indeed, beyond what many would imagine was humanly possible.

Without elaborating the history of our evolving capacity for empathy in further detail, I wish to consider how this empathic civilizing process pertains to education. If education plays a central role in the civilizing process, and if to civilize is to empathize,

then the development of empathy is a primary task of education. Rudolf Steiner expressed this in the following words:

It is tremendously important that the impulse should awaken in us, not merely to feel sympathy or antipathy toward the people we meet, not merely to hate or love something connected with the person, but to awaken a true picture of the other in us, free from love or hate... [T]his ability to develop an imaginative faculty for the other is something that must enter into pedagogy and the education of children. (*Social and Anti-Social Forces*, pp.14–16)

Rudolf Steiner does not use the word *empathy* in this passage, but I know of no better characterization of this term than: “to develop an imaginative faculty for the other... free from love or hate, sympathy or antipathy.”

Let us build upon this characterization of empathy by turning to some simple color and form exercises that can lead us to new insights and experience of empathy.

### Color exercise

In our daily lives we are surrounded by the world of color. In large part, we encounter color through some form of physical pigment on a physical surface: ink on paper, dye in cloth, paint on wood or metal. However, we also have the color experience of a rainbow, in which we seem to see the color with our physical eyes, and in which color appears to be in physical space. However, the color of a rainbow is not physical; it is not a material substance on a material surface. Similarly, the yellow sun appears distinct from the blue sky, but the color of the sun can change from yellow to orange-red, and the blue of the sky can change to purple. As with a rainbow, the yellow of the sun

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and the blue of the sky are not “on” anything; they are “in” the air by means of the interplay of light and dark.

In daily life, whether we are looking at colored pigment or colored light, color appears outside and separate from us. Nonetheless, most people are sensitive to the way color affects them; typically they like some colors and dislike others.

With this in mind, let us turn to the color circle to discover another dimension of experience. I will assume that readers of this publication know the color circle and can avail themselves of an actual image of it.

**Step 1:** Begin by slowly moving your gaze around the color circle, making a mental note of the color transitions: yellow to yellow-orange, to orange, to red-orange, to red, to red-purple, to purple, to purple-blue, to blue, to blue-green, to green, to green-yellow, and back to yellow.

**Step 2:** After orienting yourself to the various colors and color relationships, go around again, only now focus on your feeling experience. At first, note whether any colors evoke a sympathetic response and whether any evoke an antipathetic reaction.

**Step 3:** Having noted your likes/dislikes, go around the color circle again. This time, try to imagine yourself within the color, as if you have become the mood or quality of each color. Hold the question: What qualities do I feel with the various colors? It can be helpful to compare one color with another, as contrast often evokes a clear impression of different qualities, such as contrasts of warmth and coolness, stimulating and calming, light and heavy, diffuse and dense.

**Step 4:** Ideally, one repeats this exercise every day for a week or more, so the feeling experiences becomes more clear and vivid.

We can marvel that colors evoke such feelings in us. Approached in the above manner, a color circle becomes something like a mirror: Instead of reflecting our outer appearance, it reflects our inner self. We discover an intimate relationship

between the warmth and coolness of color and our inner experiences of warmth and coolness.

For our purposes, it is important that we note the two different ways in which our feelings can engage with color. On the one hand, we naturally feel sympathy or antipathy. With a degree of effort, we can rein in our subjective feelings, and in so doing, we become aware of the qualities of the colors themselves as distinct from our reactions to them. We need not eradicate our subjective reactions to a color but simply set them aside in order to awaken to the redness of red and the blueness of blue. In this way our feeling becomes an organ for perceiving qualities. Rudolf Steiner called this faculty “artistic feeling.”

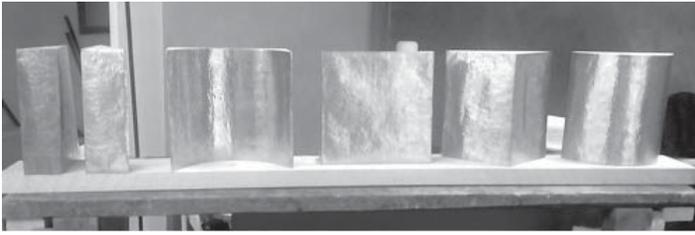
In summary, we can speak of:

- *Subjective feeling* in regards to feeling sympathy/antipathy, like/dislike.
- *Objective feeling* in regards to feeling the inner quality of color, and other phenomenon.
- *Artistic feeling* as a synonym for objective feeling, as well as the faculty by which we perceive and experience objective qualities.

### Form exercise

Often when people learn that I am a sculptor, the first question they ask is what medium I work in. Although this seems like a natural question to ask, my usual response is that I do not define myself by the material I use. Not only do I use a variety of materials, but more importantly, my primary interest and love is the world of form. As a painter I use physical pigment to make color visible. As a sculptor I use physical materials such as clay, wood, stone, and copper to make the world of forms visible.

In the work pictured on p.15, I used copper to make visible five formed surfaces. From right to left they are a convex curve, a convex angle, a flat plane, a concave curve and two parallel surfaces creating a space between them. What in the copper appears as five separate and fixed forms can be shown as a moving spectrum of forms using a sheet of paper or card.



**Step 1:** Hold a large piece of paper—8 x 11 or bigger—in front of you so it appears as a flat surface. Carefully bend the paper so it becomes a slight convex curve. Continue to bend the paper so it goes from a shallow to a full convex curve. Allow the paper to slowly return to flat surface.

**Step 2:** Carefully, bend the flat paper so it becomes a slight concave curve. Continue to bend the paper so it goes from a shallow to a full concave curve. Allow the paper to slowly return to a flat surface.

**Step 3:** Repeat Steps 1 & 2 a few times, going through the whole spectrum from flat to convex and concave curves, holding the question: What do I feel as the flat surface becomes a convex curve? What do I feel when the flat surface becoming a concave curve?

**Step 4:** With another piece of paper that has been folded in half, bend it so it makes a shallow angle and then a more acute angle. Repeat this a few times with the question: What do I feel with a convex angle compared to a convex curve?

**Step 5:** Lastly, with two pieces of paper, create two parallel planes so you look through the space between them. Repeat this with the question: What do I feel when looking through the space between two parallel planes in contrast to a concave curve?

Let us review and reflect upon the above exercise:

In the first instance, it is natural to focus on the physical material, whether it is the beautiful copper or the more modest paper or card. Having noted the material, we can choose to direct our attention from the material to the forms made visible by the material.

In attending to the form, it is natural for us to note which forms are round and which are flat and angular, which are convex or concave. Having analyzed the forms with our thinking, we can choose to turn our attention to our feeling experience of the forms.

In attending with our feeling, it is natural for us to feel sympathetic toward some forms and unsympathetic toward other forms—perhaps we like the curves but dislike the angles, or vice versa. Having noted our feelings of like and dislike, we can choose to direct our attention to the qualities inherent in a curve compared to an angle, or a convex curve compared to a concave curve.

It is neither easy nor always necessary to find the words to describe these feeling experiences. In fact, rather than contrive intellectual interpretations, it is far better to repeat the form experiences again and again in a meditative spirit. Through repetition, the various form qualities become more vivid until their different qualities become self-evident. Whether on our first try or only after many attempts, we may experience qualities that can be described as expanding or contracting, opening or closing, living or crystalline, and softening or hardening.

### Vowel exercise

Artistic feeling can be exercised not only with visual phenomena but other phenomena such as the vowel sounds of *ah* (as in “father”), *ay* (as in “say”), *ee* (as in “see”), *o* (as in “so”), and *oo* (as in “food”).

**Step 1.** As you slowly speak the vowels aloud, attend to which parts of your mouth and tongue are involved in making each sound—such as from the back to front of your mouth.

**Step 2.** Speak the sequence of vowels aloud several more times, but now with artistic feeling so that you feel the quality of each vowel.

**Step 3.** In silence, let the sequence of vowel sounds resonate inwardly. Quietly, meditate on the quality of each vowel.

We can do the above exercise simply in order to know the vowels in a deeper and more intimate way. However, I bring it after the above form exercise so that we might discover a correspondence between the quality of the five vowels and the five-formed surfaces. Again, nothing is gained by forcing this into some system. Instead of naming the forms according to whether they are flat or curved, convex or concave, we can ponder the vowel sounds as possible names for the five forms because they express corresponding qualities. Do not try to figure this out intellectually, but instead simply hold the question: Which form feels like *ee*? Which form feels like *ah*, *o*, *ay*, and *oo*?

### **Artistic feeling and empathy**

Based on these artistic experiences with color, form, and the vowel sounds, we will now consider the broader significance of artistic feeling. Artistic feeling can be awakened and developed through artistic experiences, but it is by no means limited to the realm of art.

Artistic feeling can be exercised with every sense organ. Through artistic feeling we discover that every sense phenomenon has a qualitative dimension—qualities of touch, smell, taste, sound, speech, movement, even thinking.

Artistic feeling is the faculty whereby we perceive and experience the inner qualities of all phenomena, including those that belong to the inner life of another person. When we speak about entering into the inner experience of another person, we use the word “empathy.” In one sense, artistic feeling and empathy are synonyms, but I believe it is more helpful to speak of artistic feeling as the faculty by which we exercise empathy. In schooling artistic feeling we are schooling empathy. Conversely, if we are seeking ways to develop empathy, then schooling artistic feeling is an important means.

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Developing artistic feeling in the arts does not result in becoming a master of empathy immediately. At best, this is a long and slow path. But developing artistic feeling—through work with color, form, music, and the other arts—we cultivate empathy.

Note: Artists have no claim to being more empathic than anyone else, if only because not all artists cultivate and exercise artistic feeling in their creative process, let alone in other spheres of life. The purpose of this article is to motivate artists and art teachers, as much as others, to develop artistic feeling as a way to enhance their own capacity for empathy. In addition, helping others develop a greater capacity for empathy, by schooling artistic feeling through the arts, adds a new dimension to the vocation of the artist.

### **Expanding the scope of reality**

Let us return to the capacities developed through the sciences and the arts with the question: What dimensions of reality do we know through these different capacities?

In learning to measure, count, and weigh we know more consciously the *quantitative* aspects of the world. Through artistic feeling we learn to know more consciously the *qualitative* dimension of the world. If the quantitative elements pertain to the physical material reality of the world, what reality do qualities reveal? Some may say they are illusionary, or simply superfluous. We shall consider the realm of qualities as the manifestation of another dimension of reality working into and through physical reality.

The prevailing mindset of our time, derived mostly from the sciences, assumes that material reality is the only reality. Our inner life of thoughts, feelings, and desires, which seem real enough to our experience, are deemed by this scientific worldview to be nothing other than a subjective interpretation of objective reality

described in terms of electro-chemical processes in our brain and nervous system.

In our honorable quest to rise above superstitious beliefs and strive for first-hand and objective knowledge, we face the challenges of contemporary life with a worldview that regards matter as the only reality.

Ironically, matter as the solid and heavy stuff we experience is also no longer considered real. The bedrock of reality lies in atomic particles and processes that exist beyond the scope of direct human experience. All we experience of the outer world, as well as our inner self, is discredited as subjective illusion. It seems to go unnoticed, or conveniently ignored, that according to its own logic, the scientific worldview is itself a subjective illusion. This

scientific blind spot offers room for optimism.

As a practical matter, even scientists who theoretically regard themselves as materialists, in practice trust that human consciousness is an autonomous self-sustaining reality.

Admittedly, the apparent dichotomy between matter and consciousness has challenged the greatest minds for millennia, so it would be naïve to think it can be easily resolved. However, each of us has a life to live as best we can. In light of this reality we cannot wait till some consensus is reached about the relationship between mind and matter. Many will simply resort to what they believe in, but for those who are reluctant to abandon the scientific enterprise entirely, there is another avenue open.

It is reasonable to contemplate the possibility that consciousness derives from matter—the mind-from-matter thesis—based on all the brain research that maps the various parts of the brain and their relationship to particular cognitive activities. Examples of accidents and illnesses, in which injury to certain parts of the brain adversely affects particular cognitive capacities,

are used to support the view that consciousness originates in material processes.

However, this impressive body of evidence does not prove the mind-from-matter thesis because the same evidence supports another equally reasonable interpretation. It is equally

conceivable that the brain and nervous system are to consciousness what radios and televisions are in receiving audio and visual programs over the airways. As all the parts of a radio, TV, or computer must be in good working order to properly receive transmissions, so likewise, contemporary brain research supports the view that all parts of the brain must be in good functioning order for human consciousness to manifest in the physical world. There is no factual

basis for saying the brain creates consciousness when all we observe is the co-presence of brain activity and consciousness.

At the very least we must hold both the mind-from-matter thesis and the matter-from-mind thesis as having equal merit. However, it must be noted that the mind-from-matter thesis is comparable to thinking that the physical components and processes of a radio, TV, or computer are the creative source of the audio and visual content.

The dire challenges of our times require a forthright public discourse on the limits of what scientists, engineers, and mathematicians offer their fellow human beings insofar as they limit themselves to only one mode of consciousness and one dimension of reality. Exact *quantitative* observations are valuable to us as the basis for mathematical thinking and the technological innovations founded on those capacities.

However, these capacities limit us to a narrow slice of reality. Most of our social, economic, and ecological challenges originate from the fact that we develop and exercise only this one side of our

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human potential at the expense of other sides. When we cultivate our capacity to observe the *qualitative* dimension in our selves, other people, and the world, we expand our consciousness to other dimensions of reality.

We need to work with the reality and lawfulness of the physical world, but for a full and creative life, we need to discern and work with the non-material realities embedded within physical reality. We do just this when we develop our capacity for *qualitative* perception. The capacities of the scientist that are founded on *quantitative*

perception allow us to know the physical world of matter. In developing artistic feeling and the ability to perceive more fully and exactly the world of qualities, we know through direct experience, not simply as belief, the realities of soul and spirit. Without developing artistic feeling and empathy we remain blind to the reality of soul and spirit in ourselves, other people, all other creatures, and above all in the living Earth as a whole.

### **Developing spirit individuality**

What do I mean by *soul* and *spirit*? These terms take on practical meaning and usefulness when we are not limited by antiquated or popular connotations, and we understand the difference between soul and spirit, rather than assume they mean more or less the same thing. Both soul and spirit refer to aspects of our inner self in contrast to our outer bodily self. However, *soul* refers to all that we experience as our thinking, our feeling, and our willing. The content of our soul is unique—no one thinks, feels, or wills like anyone else—and for this reason, we regard each other as unique individuals. In this context, I prefer the word *personality* as a synonym for *soul* and reserve the word *individuality* as a synonym for *spirit*. The reason for this preference will become apparent as we proceed.

**When we cultivate our capacity to observe the qualitative dimension in our selves, other people, and the world, we expand our consciousness to other dimensions of reality.**

If we observe our thinking, we can observe thoughts streaming through us from waking to falling asleep. For much of the day we make little or no effort to control what we think. At the very least, we can distinguish between instances of thoughts that come and go of themselves and those moments in thinking when we exercise a greater or lesser degree of inner effort.

If we observe our feelings, we can observe many feelings flow through us largely beyond our control, often even beyond our conscious awareness. Here too, we can distinguish between

those feelings that float through us, even overpower us, compared to feelings we control in some measure. For example, with our color and form exercises we can learn to master the natural stream of sympathy/antipathy in order to feel the qualities of redness and blueness.

The same can be observed with our desires and wishes that are the source of volition. Most volitional impulses are below the threshold of consciousness, but sometimes we can observe our self wrestling with will impulses—to take another cookie, or not, for example—in order to exercise some control over will impulses that otherwise simply stream through us.

For our purposes, I draw attention to our capacity to simply observe our thinking, feeling, willing that precedes any effort to control these soul activities. It is important to ask: Who is observing my thinking, my feeling, my volition?

### **'I' observe my thinking, feeling, willing**

If 'I' observe my thinking, then 'I' am not my thinking. If 'I' observe my feeling, 'I' am not my feeling. If 'I' observe my soul, then 'I' am not my soul, or my personality. 'I' am my spirit, my spirit individuality. In observing the thinking, feeling, and willing of my soul personality, 'I' become more conscious of 'I,' of my spirit individuality. This is where the distinction between personality

and individuality, between soul and spirit, has far-reaching significance. We will consider it in regard to artistic feeling and empathy.

It is a gift if some people, some of the time, can be empathic to others without much effort. For many of us, much of the time, empathy requires some effort, especially with certain people. We cannot underestimate the value and significance of making an inner effort in any realm, whether it is in learning to spell, speaking a new language, playing a musical instrument, or working on a shaky relationship. Who is making the inner effort to change and develop a quality or capacity? Again, it is 'I,' my spirit individuality, who initiates such inner effort and activity.

### Developing the artist in each individual

It is becoming more common for parents and teachers today to concern themselves with the development of their children's full human potential, and not simply their success or failure with the content and skills of particular subjects. Teachers and parents seem ready to see math and science not simply as ends in themselves but as vehicles for developing essential capacities such as thinking logically and critically.

In this same light, we can more fully appreciate the vital role of art in education. Imagine a world in which all children, including the not-so-artistic, have the opportunity to develop their capacity to know more deeply the qualities living in color and music. Through such schooling of artistic feeling, our children develop a heightened capacity to know the world and other human beings more empathically—in other words, as they are in reality and not as we want them to be. Furthermore, the inner effort needed to develop artistic feeling and empathy strengthens their spirit individuality, their creative spirit. Education has the task of developing the whole human being: body, soul, and spirit.

### Developing artistic feeling and empathic individuality are core tasks that belong to any education claiming to develop the full potential of each individual.

We know a good deal about how to develop the body and one side of our inner nature, the capacities of the scientist in us. But we have only begun to recognize and develop the capacities of the artist in each individual. And we have barely scratched the surface in learning how to nurture the creative spirit, the spirit individuality in each human being.

My purpose in this article is to inspire artists, art teachers, all educators, and anyone else open to seeing the vital role of art in preparing our children to meet the political, economic, and ecological challenges of our time. To prepare our children to meet the needs and challenges of the present and future world, we must develop their full humanity. We must help develop in each individual the capacities of the artist as much as we presently develop the capacities of the scientist. Developing artistic feeling and empathic individuality are core tasks that belong to the core curriculum of any education claiming to develop the whole human being and the full human potential of each individual.

**Michael Howard** began sculpting at the age of 15. He met the work of Rudolf Steiner in 1969 when he attended Emerson College in England. His recent artistic activity explores the creation of visual music in drawings, paintings, relief sculptures, and moving colored light. He edited and wrote the introduction to *Art as Spiritual Activity, a collection of Rudolf Steiner's lectures on art*. He also wrote *Educating the Will, concerning the role of the visual arts in education*. Currently, he is working on a book with the working title, *In Metamorphosis: The Art of Shaping Our Full Humanity and a Human World*. He lives and works in Amherst, MA. Email him at [livingformstudio@gmail.com](mailto:livingformstudio@gmail.com), or visit his website: [livingformstudio.com](http://livingformstudio.com).