



Because of the growing mobility of an ever greater number of people, we increasingly find ourselves face-to-face with individuals belonging to other cultures. They have grown up in environments totally different from ours. They have a different religion, a different physical appearance. Their customs, food, clothes, attitudes to sexuality, to time, to manners and sense of duty, to work and money—just about everything—is different.

Our first reaction is often suspicion. It has been shown that racial prejudice has deep roots, and that suspicion is not rational but rather based on an

immediate emotional reaction that is beyond our control. Thus even those who in theory say they have no prejudices, really do have them.

Training in empathy is perhaps one of the most urgent needs in our educational programs at all levels. Yehudi Menuhin, the great violinist, once made an extraordinary statement in an interview: If German youth had been brought up not only to appreciate the music of Beethoven, but to sing and dance traditional Jewish music, the Holocaust would not have happened.

But empathy does not only resolve problems; it helps us feel better. Studies have shown that people who are more capable of empathy are also more satisfied in life, healthier, less dogmatic, and more creative. Despite all these advantages, empathy evokes a good deal of resistance. The willingness to identify with another for the sake of understanding him is seen by some as a weakness.

Yet it is the best solution for everyone. The moment someone feels understood and realizes that we see the validity in his point of view and the legitimacy of his demands, he changes. In this way we can avoid countless complications.