

Using Empathy to Remember Humanity

“The Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC) is not just a museum where you go to once, it is an education and lessons for humanity Centre” emphasizes founder and executive director of the JHGC Tali Nates. The JHGC is also a Centre of memory and social activism that warns against the dangers of apathy and indifference.

To understand someone’s situation, empathy needs to be applied. Several contemporary emotions researchers have understood empathy as the ability to identify and understand other people’s emotions. In addition, empathy is the antidote for indifference (a lack of interest, concern or sympathy). Empathy with another’s pain can also help us face and overcome our own pain and distress. Certainly, in South Africa there is a constant need to interrogate the foundations of our country as well as ourselves as citizens about the country’s ongoing as well as its historical pain. One quote that has always been useful to me with regards to empathy is by 150 BC African-Roman playwright Terence, whom after being freed from slavery spoke these words towards his former oppressors “I am human and nothing human can be alien to me”.

A story of empathy that caught my attention that is featured in the permanent exhibition of the JHGC is the story of Xavier. In 2009 Xavier, a survivor of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda who lived at the time in Johannesburg, gave his testimony to a group of grade 9 learners from St Stithians high school in Johannesburg. He told them that he lost his entire family and did not know where their remains were. His wish was to travel back to Rwanda, find their remains and give them a proper burial. This would help him heal.

After that talk, the group of learners was so moved by this, that between 2009 and 2010 they embarked on a fundraising project and were able to raise enough funds for him to travel back to Rwanda, find his parents’ remains and give them a proper burial. This was a wonderful example of empathy between a group of largely privileged teenagers, with a man who had survived a horrific genocide in Rwanda. This story, with some of the artifacts found with the remains of his mother, Beatrice, as well as photos taken during the process, are featured in the permanent exhibition of the JHGC.

In conclusion, let us allow ourselves to apply empathy to ‘others’ always. After the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, the racial tensions in South Africa will still be there, the ‘othering’ of foreigners (xenophobia or Afrophobia) sentiments will still remain and sexual and gender-based violence will continue to plague our society. The opportunity to apply empathy will still be present. The important facet of the JHGC purpose, to warn against the dangers of apathy and indifference, will still require great dedication from all of us. Perhaps even, more than ever!

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When Xavier located and exhumed his mother's remains, she was still wearing her rosary and holding the key to her house.



Rosary of Ndebereho Beatrice, exhumed by Xavier Ngabo in December 2009.



PERSONAL ACTIVITY:

Choose 3 different types of people you know



1. someone you care about (a friend, a member of your family or a loved one)
2. someone you do not like
3. someone you are indifferent to



With each person, find three things you can empathize with.

Be honest with yourself when doing this activity, as it is for your own interrogation, growth and understanding.

“All humans are human; There are no humans more human than others”

Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire
Force Commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) in 1994.