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US VS THEM

A Case For Social Empathy

JOSHUA KROOK

To Irene,

For seeing me as I am,

Not merely as I present myself to be.

"If thou art pained by any external thing, it is not this thing that disturbs thee, but thy own judgement about it...

... it is we ourselves who produce the judgements... and, as we may say, write them in ourselves, it being in our power not to write them, and it being in our power, if perchance these judgements have imperceptibly got admission to our minds, to wipe them out."

~Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*.[1]

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[1] Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*, George Long (trans.), (The Internet Classics Archive, 2000)

I believe it would be of interest to the casual reader that the contents of this book are very much reflected in the relationship between the author and myself. He, a Chinese History Major come law student, and myself a Finance Graduate with a penchant for Philosophy. Our cross-disciplinary bent influenced the majority of our discussions and to that extent reinforces the central message of this book. That is, the key to restoring diverse interaction back into our lives lies in a mutual understanding that transcends simple categorisations or a simple single-disciplinary focus.

My initial encounter with the author was peculiar enough. It was the second year of my undergraduate studies at the University of Sydney and I had recently joined the university's one and only literature society. Thus far in the semester the society had already hosted a few events. However on that particular evening it had managed to secure my attendance. In an ode to writers past, the event took place in the second level of a student dive bar. I duly purchased my drink and followed the sound of revelry upstairs. The booked room was set up with two long wooden tables set in a right angle formation and members were seated irregularly amongst the chairs. The theme that night was discussing stories written by members. Printed copies of submissions were being passed around. In my enthusiasm for the club's cause I had submitted my own piece and watched surreptitiously as it passed between hands, its contents unexamined.

The night progressed and as with all social gatherings consisting of students the cause of our union soon dissolved with the dull chink of plastic beer glasses and drunken rants about book-to-film travesties. After a few hours I was tired and though to leave and spare myself another conversation about the continued relevance of Marxist literature. It was roughly at the point that I met the author. I had asked the similar questions of introduction but was surprised to see the conversation take-off with a sly reference to Churchill.

The rest of the conversation does not fare well out of context but the critical take-away is this. Our meeting might never have taken place. Fond as I am of literature, it was with significant trepidation that I finally decided to attend the event. Being a business student, the prospect of interacting with the cardigan-wearing cliques of art students both excited and intimidated me. I knew a society that enshrined literature would be a veritable sanctum for such individuals and I would be a strange member in their ranks.

The factor that convinced me to go is one that is echoed throughout this book and could be its catch cry. I realised that the circumstances that divided myself, and those who seemed alien to me were merely that, circumstances. The narrative of their life so far was an impediment to a chance encounter between us, but did not fundamentally sabotage a potential relationship. I began to realise that with all strangers there is something *central* I could share with them. A mutual understanding of this fact was all that was required.

Unfortunately for me, few people shared this opinion that particular evening. They saw our divergent circumstances as reason enough to avoid further conversation.

The appeal of cocooning oneself from diverse opinion always bears appeal but it is on these lines of preference that larger societal fault-lines exist. This book focuses on these fault lines between diverse groups; a culture that has created seemingly insurmountable barriers. As the author puts it, we are born without prejudice and so I say we should die the same way.

Swapnil Mindhe

3/5/2014

Introduction:

The modern city is a place of social circles: clusters of contacts who know each other and strangers who don't. It is a place where diverse relationships are in decline. In the city, strangers seldom meet beyond daily functions. Instead they brush by with a haste and preoccupation that so defines a century of 'too little time'. Where once we valued common courtesy, now we encourage the message of "stranger danger". Often we do not test this message as we grow older. Instead we live side by side with strangers and other groups, and remain firmly as ever, psychologically miles apart.

Instead of intermingling communities, we form cities with boundaries and social circles "firmly closed against neighboring, strange, or in some way antagonistic [other] circles."[i] The stranger, above all, is categorized as an "outsider", feared and to be avoided. But this categorization spreads to those who do not share our *core values, ideals or identity features* - those who are different to us.

By ascribing people categories such as race, religion, demographic, interests, profession and so on, it becomes easy for us to label others as a subset of the majority population. From this categorization we create "us" vs. "them" paradigms, where we view outsiders with either indifference or hostility. Instead of a city being a place of cohesive coexistence, it becomes divided into thousands of tiny groups, each vying for self-interest. So we become "a medley of peoples, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit".[ii]

In this book I attempt to address this problem. I ask the following questions:

1) How can we reduce our instinctual urge to categorise other people?

2) How can we bring back mutual understanding, empathy and common concern between ourselves, strangers and other groups?

3) How can we restore a sense of "community" into modern cities?

My own research reveals a large body of evidence leading to a single conclusion: if we want to connect with strangers in our society, and form diverse, cohesive communities, we must minimise the categorical distinctions in our everyday life. By either recategorising ourselves -to see everyone as part of humanity as a whole- or decategorising everyone -to see everyone as an individual, and not a 'group' member- we can begin to reassess our personal relationships and form wider friendship circles.

Alone, this process is daunting, if not impossible. However we can do this as a society by bringing people closer together. Bringing people together in the same physical space gives them a chance to stop seeing each other as a part of one group or another, and start to realise commonalities. This is how friendship – **between groups** – is created. Friendship begins where barriers are destroyed.

By encouraging diverse interactions between a diverse range of people, we can end feelings of isolation and alienation in big cities. Likewise we can restore a sense of empathy for stranger. We can recognise that while some strangers are dangerous, all strangers are human beings. This ultimate goal of a unified and diverse community, whilst romantic and idealistic, is nevertheless something to strive for if we are to ever have a sense of "community" spirit ever again in modern city life.

Chapter 1: Birth and Prejudice

We are born without prejudice.

Ask a baby if he hates any particular person and he will stare at you, blink occasionally and eventually (as is the norm for someone his age) burst into tears –not because of a profound distaste for the idea of hatred- but because of a need for food, security or toiletry. Babies are unique in viewing all humans as equal.[2] They are the only humans who have yet to learn the complexity of social structures, race and other forms of social categorisation. To them we are all the same, and the idea of creating a hierarchy of people they meet has yet to cross their mind. Or, more accurately, has yet to be taught to them.[3]

Make a silly face to a baby in the street and regardless of whom you are or your relationship to them they will laugh. Their parents however will have one of two reactions. If you look like an upstanding member of society -albeit while contorting your face- they will laugh along with their child. If however, you look villainous, or fit into a criteria of people they 'shouldn't talk to', they will glare at you in disapproval and turn away.

An evolution has occurred in these two stages of life.

This is the story of that evolution.

In preschool we remain largely free from prejudice and associate with anyone who crosses our path – giving them the opportunity to impress us with unique personality traits and skills before passing judgment on them in the ultimate sense: deciding whether to befriend them. At this very young age, we choose friends not by predetermined characteristics of social status, but often by random and accidental mutual enjoyment of activities – computer games, sports, pranks etc.[iii] The main requirement for friendship at a young age is a shared interest in a common activity. A child that enjoys sport, for instance, is a potential friend of another sport-loving child.

Unless taught to do so, our choice of friends is not influenced by religion, demographics or social status. There *is* admittedly a tendency for pre-school friendships to develop on the basis of age (the environment hardly provides opportunities to befriend older students) and for friendships to develop between children of the same sex more than between sexes, and between the same races – because colour as a categorical tool on a very basic visual level is hard for even toddlers to avoid using (unfortunate as it is, this can be circumvented by grouping toddlers of different races together in pre-school groups – to foster mutual respect).[iv]

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[2] Discounting their parents, whom they idolise.

[3] Admittedly, there is a *from-birth* predisposition towards people with symmetrical faces. This is a precursor to physical attraction.

The reference to sex may be a cultural expectation; boys are expected to befriend boys and girls to befriend girls, because romance is prohibited in youth.

Aside from age, race and gender, the criterion of 'common interest' is a broad one. By befriending simply those who share a "common interest" we are not limited to segmentations of: demographic, social status, religion and so on. In this way, we are likely to mingle with a diverse range of children from a diverse range of backgrounds.[4]

During primary school and the beginning of high school a shift in priority takes place. Having developed a larger, more well rounded sense of our identities, we start to make more complicated and predetermined decisions about who to befriend. While once we ONLY required a shared activity, now we require much more: similar personalities, shared belief systems, similar tastes in music, film, demographic backgrounds, social status, clothes etc.[v] Of course we do not require ALL of these similarities at once, but as we age the importance of each similarity increases, and we start choosing friends based on some or all of these criteria.

The end of High School is the epitome of this process. Clear social circles are formed. Groups or "cliques" form around shared interests, beliefs and demographics.

At university a final and all-important category – career aspirations - is added to the list. The variety of people we meet diminishes markedly. Not only because of the grades required to get into university (the requirement of academic intelligence), but also the choice of a single degree. Limited to classes within a single degree, we are limited to making friends with other people who share our career aspirations, academic interests and occasionally, outlook in life. Studying finance allows us to meet students with an interest in the financial field. Studying law allows us to meet other students interested in law, politics, international relations and other "language-heavy" professions. So the process goes on.

In the working world we are often limited to making friends within the same industry or related sub/parallel industries. Investment bankers become friends with other investment bankers and those in financial and banking industries. The same is often true in other professions. This creates a narrowing of perspective and culminates in the social groups of high school forming on a much larger scale. Instead of social circles clustered around lunch tables; employment circles come to dominate entire suburbs. A "bubble culture" develops whereby corporate types associate with other corporate types in corporate suburbs. The artists flee to their own enclaves. This process culminates in the self-imposed ghetto, a system whereby suburbs are *defined and characterised by the people who live there*.

This process is cemented by networking. In the workplace, priority is given to conversations with those in the same or related industries because these conversations have the potential to facilitate promotion or career advancement. By consequence, we sacrifice conversations with those in unrelated industries who cannot give us these

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[4] Admittedly parents do limit this process by placing children in schools with certain characteristics (religious schools, private schools and specialist schools of sport, dance or music).

same financial rewards. As a result, we befriend those on the same 'ladder' as us, rather than those on different 'ladders'.

The above developmental process results in the ultimate *narrowing of the human experience*. The diversity of people we meet diminishes markedly as our lives develop. As we grow older, we move closer and closer to forming relationships **ONLY** with people in our own 'category' of society, rather than diverse "other" categories.

This culminates in a situation where everybody we know is intrinsically *similar* and not well placed to challenge our perceptions of the world around us. Instead of social cohesion, we have social isolation. Instead of diverse and intermingling communities, we have community ghettoes.

Why Does This Process Occur?

By the time we become adults we have a greater appreciation of the categorical distinctions between us. We have been taught, through the education system and the people around us, that people belong to different groups, and that these different groups are unchangeable. It is therefore not surprising that when we meet people we immediately define them by their; race, occupation, hobby, income, demographic and personality.

By having pre-existing categories in our back pocket, we can "*already tell*" if we're going to get along with them: all we have to do is judge the 'category' they belong to, and compare it to our own. If they belong to our category, we're more likely to become friends with them.

The reason why is founded in the social psychological principle: "Similarities Attract". There is a broad psychological tendency for us to associate more *with those who are similar to us, rather than those who are dissimilar.[vi]* This appears in friendships and romantic relationships (although the evidence is stronger for romantic relationships).[vii] We are attracted to, and tend to like, and spend more time with, those who are similar to us. Similarities can be in physical characteristics, but also in demographic features like: age, race, sex, income etc.[viii]

While this principle is solid psychological science, it is important to note that the 'similarities' we talk about are often social constructs. To use a trite example: I am only similar to other Australians so long as the term "Australian" exists as a categorical distinction between my country vis a vis the rest of the world. *If there was no word for "Australian", I would not be able to claim that nationalistic similarity with other Australians*. So when we say people are "similar" to us, we are often saying that they belong to the same category. But the categories we talk about are inventions of the English language.

In this way the language we use defines us, and those around us, by making everyone categorically different. We then make friends based on these categories, driven by the "similarities attract" principle. This leads to a narrowing of our relationships as we

age, which results in mainly being friends with people who are, in one way or another, similar to us.

The idea that "opposite attracts" has been largely *disproven*.[5][ix] In a romantic sense and in friendship the evidence goes ***against*** the idea that we are drawn to people who are different.[x] While we might individually consider our partners and friends to be 'nothing like us': when given a larger amount of thought and consideration, often we *do* in fact share a core set of similarities. On the other hand, if we *are in fact substantially "different"* to a spouse or friend, it may be that we have formed a relationship due to close physical proximity, itself a form of 'similar' experience.

Indeed social psychology evidences the idea of *propinquity*, similar to the "exposure effect" – the more we are exposed to a person, the higher the chances are that we will form a friendship or close romantic relationship with them. This explains why friendships and romantic relationships tend to develop in high school, the workplace and other environments where exposure occurs over a prolonged period of time. A study of college students found that students were "10 times more likely to become friends" with others cohabiting "in the same building", rather than those in neighbouring or distant buildings.[xi]

Physical proximity gives us the opportunity to get to know someone. Admittedly, it may allow us to dislike someone *much more*. By being close to someone, we get to know the things we like ***and*** dislike about them.[xii] However, even if this occurs, we are still gaining an opportunity to understand them. The risk of disliking someone is worth it in this sense. Mutual understanding is an end goal in its own right. Regardless of liking or disliking someone, if we *understand them,* then we can at least begrudgingly accept the motivations behind their actions. Indeed, the common phrase "familiarity breeds contempt" is only occasionally true. Generally familiarity "breeds liking".[xiii] We tend to like those we see very often. Just by facial recognition alone we can "like" someone or become predisposed to becoming friends with them, psychology tells us.

The truly incredible thing about physical proximity is that it lets us overcome our natural inclination to befriend *only* those "similar" to us. If we are constantly in contact with someone of a different race, gender, age or demographic there is evidence to suggest a friendship can still develop. *But in the absence of close physical proximity* we have a tendency to 'seek out one of our own'. When we have the *choice*, and the lack of constant contact, we tend to choose "similarity" over difference, and we tend to befriend ***only*** those similar to us: those belonging to *our own **'tribe'***.

A modern example of this is the way Australians treat refugees. *ABC's Vote Compass* (2013) revealed that those with a *higher exposure* to refugees in close physical proximity (within their suburbs) were more likely to welcome refugees into their community.[xiv] By contrast, those living in rural areas: that tended to lack refugees in previous decades, were less likely to welcome refugees. This suggests that communities are more accepting of diversity, if they are ***already*** diverse. Pre-existing

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[5] With the exception of dominant/submissive opposites of control, particularly in organisations as between employers and employees.

physical proximity can overcome the urge to reject others on the basis of xenophobia. It can overcome our urge to stick to one of our own. We gain a mutual respect and understanding of others if we live near them; we gain xenophobia if we live in isolated communities.

We can use the above ideas of physical proximity to overcome our natural urges to seek out 'one of our own' and foster communities that are more diverse and inclusive by nature. Instead of narrowing the type of people we interact with as we grow older, we could expand our interactions, by setting up physical situations where it is easier to interact with those who are "different". By bringing disparate groups into the same space, we can foster *mutual understanding, empathy and in some cases friendship*. This could mend some of the categorical division that exists in society today. Over time, if we bring people together, we could unite behind a common understanding of humanity. By doing so we could end categorical prejudice.

Chapter 2:

The Risks: Empathy

The process of categorisation is as old as man, yet as old as man alone, for no other animal species categorises itself so neatly. It is a process by nature unnatural and yet natural enough for humans to do it without thinking. Yet the ultimate, most vulnerable and weakest victim of categorization is *empathy*. Categorization is a process that destroys the very empathy that enlivens communities: the empathy that traditionally binds diverse communities *together*.

It is a simple matter to rank the empathy we feel for those around us.
Consider the following: How aggrieved would you be if a family member was murdered? How about a friend? An acquaintance? A stranger? A stranger overseas? A stranger 100 years ago in history? Our empathy diminishes the further we get from the individual in question.[xv] The more remote they are from us individually; the less capacity we have to empathise with their predicament.

The philosopher Peter Singer theorizes an "expanding circle" of empathy for those around us.[xvi] Singer suggests that when faced with a small kid drowning in a pond in front of us, we feel obliged to save that child (even if others are passing by in willful blindness). Yet, when faced by this same predicament of a child drowning: yet now in a foreign country beyond our perception, we react differently. Conceptually, the geographic distance makes no difference (a child is drowning), but our action (in not giving to charity, for instance) proves that we perceive a difference between the two. Our empathy is diminished by geographic distance and a lack of direct perception – we cannot directly "see" the pain of the child's predicament.

In this way, empathy is an instinct that remains strongest for those closest to us. Our friends and family receive more empathy than our neighbours, or strangers in another city. In the absence of friendship or kinship it is easy to disregard someone as "not one of our own", in not belonging to our class, social group, race, religion, ideology and so on. We create a personal distinction between 'us' vs. 'them', in which we feel empathy and a common mutuality when we say 'us', and indifference, if not outright hostility, when we say 'them'. If we belong to a sporting team, we feel empathy and concern if a player on our team gets injured right before the Grand Final. By contrast, we feel less concern, and perhaps even joy, if a player on the *other* team gets injured. Our empathy is diminished for this "rival" group, whilst enhanced for our own.

A similar point is that of association. Sports fans tend to diminish their own association with their team after a loss, and increase their association after a win.[xvii] After a team wins, a fan is more likely to wear the team's sport colours in the proceeding days and post more on the team's messaging boards.[xviii] Crucially, empathy is built in this process, where the fans are literally seeing *themselves* as 'part' of the win. In terms of language, sports fans associate or distance themselves depending on the language they use.[xix] When their team wins, they often claim "*We*

won last weekend!" However, if their team loses, they have a tendency to distance themselves from the loss; "*They* played terribly last weekend!" This process of disassociation makes the loss *less personal and less egregious* and diminishes empathy. This process of "othering" forms the basis behind "us" vs. "them" paradigms that undermine empathy for opposing/competing groups.[xx]

"Othering" in research on racism, for instance, is said to form the catalyst for racist comments.[xxi] Instead of seeing another race as part of the collective "we" (humans), we view them as a distinctly separate "they" (another race).[xxii] A recent study of High Schoolers:

> "*Identified an underlying racism among white Anglo-Saxon Australians that emerged in their language,* **for example, the use of the word 'them' to describe students from non-Anglo-Saxon backgrounds as opposed to the use of the word 'us' when describing themselves**." (Emphasis added)[xxiii]

This process of "othering" can result in overly simplistic tags assigned to groups other than our own. In the study above, some students categorized all people from "China, Japan, Korea and other Asian countries as 'Asians'", disregarding which country the students actually came from, or the possibility that the students were born in Australia. The reverse trend was also true:

> "*Some participants from non-Anglo-Saxon backgrounds described students with lighter coloured skin as 'Aussie' or 'White', as if they too were a homogenous group [even though some of those described were Middle Eastern, or not of Anglo-Saxon descent]*".[xxiv]

The above categorical distinctions are errors of logic that reveal the simplicity of ascribing a category to an entire body of people. Simplistic designations of physical characteristics along with the "othering" process form the basis behind racism. It is okay, some argue, to ascribe a tag or label to an entire body of people, disregarding individual variance. It is okay, some argue, to treat people differently if they belong to one of these "other" groups.

This process of group categorization and "othering" can, at its worst, lead to human indifference to suffering on a grand scale. During the 1940s Nazi regime, Nazi soldiers rationalised the atrocities they committed in part by viewing the humans they persecuted as belonging to a different "category" of species. They viewed the Jewish people as a "they", an "other", distinctly separate and not belonging to the collective "we", humanity as a whole. By classifying Jewish people as sub-human ("Untermensch") or animals, the soldiers could *consciously* commit atrocities without feeling empathy for the victims. Even then, soldiers struggled to commit the atrocities on an ongoing basis. A true story tells of a Nazi soldier who, when asked to shoot a Jewish child, could not make himself do so.[xxv] Despite being in a system where Jewish children were viewed as sub-human, when the girl reached out a hand and touched his hand it struck a nerve that no military training could over-ride. That small interaction reignited his empathy as he realised that the girl was *a child, just like any other child. A young girl, just like any other girl. Just like any German girl.*

This is how empathy is built:

- Empathy is built by breaking down barriers between people.

- Categorisation builds new barriers by exaggerating the differences between us, "othering" groups from one another and thereby creating "us" vs "them" paradigms.

- Therefore, we will only increase empathy if we stop categorizing each other, and stop treating other groups differently.

As the evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins argues:

> *If we are to build a non-religious morality… we need to… expand the circle of those to whom we feel empathy [and] break down the barriers that divide us; the tribalism of religion, class, race and ideology.*[xxvi]

It is the extenuation of class, race and ideological warfare that is currently dividing people in our society and in the process destroying the empathy that these "opposing" groups may have for one another.

By contrast, if an "opposing" group is viewed as part of the collective (*society as a whole, as a single entity*) then empathy is more readily available. It is almost impossible to empathise if we say "*they* are suffering", but much more possible to empathise if we say "*we* are suffering". We can use language to reframe the discussion and include groups exterior to our own as part of our own "category" in society. By including other groups as part of "us" and "we", we can readily empathise with them.

Research has shown that empathy can be increased in this way, particularly by "enhancing the perceived similarity between" *ourselves and others*.[xxvii] This "similarity" measure includes similarity of experience (of emotions and events) and perceived similarity of emotion: similar worries and so on.[xxviii] When we perceive ourselves to be similar, in some way to someone else, the evidence shows that we have a greater capacity to empathise with them and help them out.[xxix]

The highest levels of empathy can be stimulated in situations of "interpersonal unity, wherein the conception of self and other are not distinct but are merged to some degree."[xxx] We can see this in the responses to natural disasters - where communities unite behind the rebuilding effort. Empathy is more prevalent in these circumstances because the communities are in "unity", behind a common goal, foregoing individual interest for the common good.[xxxi]

This is a rebranding exercise. Instead of seeing ourselves as part of exclusive groups, we must instead see ourselves as part of the collective – as part of a shared experience of human life. If we don't follow down this path we risk going the other way, and developing a certain emotion called *schadenfreude*.

Chapter 3: Schadenfreude

Each of us has a primal evolutionary instinct to gain pleasure from another's pain. Due to evolution, when our enemy is hurt, we celebrate. When our enemy is killed, we chant in the streets. When *many* of our enemies are killed we declare: "mission accomplished". Survival of our 'tribe' mandates joy at the death of our enemies just as it mandates sadness at the death of our allies. This is how primitive societies survived, by caring for their kin and killing their foes.

The joy we experience at the pain of others is called *Schadenfreude*. It's a German word that encompasses enjoyment at the suffering, pain and troubles of others. *Schadenfreude* is the opposite of empathy and is generally directed towards people "outside" our own group. It would be difficult for American citizens to feel "joy" at the death of their *own* soldiers, for example. American soldiers, just as American citizens, belong to an "ingroup": a group of commonality and similarity of citizenship and "values". This makes the common American soldier a person with whom American citizens can empathise. They feel a common "unity" of identity, blurring self and other to unite behind nationality, citizenship and loyalty to "God and country". This same empathy does not exist for *enemy* soldiers, who are rivals in the ultimate sense, and a threat to the citizen's own very existence.

The above military example may be extreme, but similar examples exist on a more day-to-day basis. The classic example is that of a sports fans who has a vested interest in his team's success. Through his vested interest a fan can experience *schadenfreude* when the rival or "enemy" team fails or is 'hurt' in some way.[xxxii] Indeed, the threat of "inferiority" can be enough to trigger *schadenfreude* toward a rival group. Hence, when one group competes with another, and the first group is shown to be weaker in some way, *schadenfreude* can substitute as a form of emotional "revenge" upon the stronger team.[xxxiii] Sports fans risk feeling inferiority if their own team loses a particular match. This looming threat of inferiority along with their vested interest in their team's success, contributes to feelings of *schadenfreude*. They will celebrate when the other team fails to score a goal.

> *"Red Sox and Yankees Fan report feeling pleasure, and show activity in reward-related brain regions… when they watch their rival [team] fail to score against their favored baseball team, and also against a less competitive team in the same league."[xxxiv]*

This feeling of *schadenfreude* can extend beyond the rivalry of teams, into associated merchandise. Sports fans may come to "detest" companies who sponsor a rival team, just as they are more inclined to like companies who sponsor their own team.[xxxv] It can be theorized that the proliferation of fights that break out between soccer fans in the UK, Europe, Brazil and elsewhere may portray this *schadenfreude* by association.[xxxvi] When a fan becomes fanatical, they begin to feel *schadenfreude* towards a rival team's fans and enjoy the experience of hurting these "rivals", as if hurting the rival team itself.[xxxvii] Due to the nature of competition, fans can see

themselves as 'insiders' of a group, and rivals as 'outsiders', and thus diminish their individual capacity to empathise with their enemy's pain.

Political parties are formulated on a similar basis of competition, diminished empathy and enhanced *schadenfreude between rival populations*.[xxxviii] The premise of democracy is that a political party's success depends on a rival party's failure. Elections are structured as a conflict of "us" vs. "them", and in this manner, empathy is drastically diminished between competing groupings. This is one reason why modern politics is so vitriolic, because parties simply do not care about each other, and indeed are structured in a system that makes it harder for them to care about each other. Instead, they gain active enjoyment from seeing each other's pain.

> *"The domain of politics is prime territory for feelings of schadenfreude, especially for people strongly identified with political parties... This is clearly the case for events that [are] embarrassing in nature, but also for events that are ... "objectively" harmful all around, such as a downturn in the economy or... harm suffered by troops."*[xxxix]

In a system of mutual *schadenfreude* it can be asked, what *mutually* beneficial policies can be enacted? How can change occur if the major parties hate each other or *enjoy* seeing each other in pain?

We have seen this *schadenfreudian* dynamic play out nationally with the vitriolic opposition of Tony Abbott (2009-2013). Abbott *enjoyed* watching the government fail and in fact celebrated their 'incompetence', regularly speaking about it in the media. One can ask: why would someone *celebrate* economic mismanagement, when that mismanagement could affect their own life?

The answer: in a group we tend to lose part of our own identity and take on the identity of the group. In politics, part of the "group" identity is a dislike of the opposition. In such an environment it becomes easy for people like Tony Abbott to reach political heights, riding on the back of negativity. It is not surprising that he enjoyed watching the government's "incompetence", for watching your rival tear itself to shreds is enjoyable in competitive systems.

Schadenfreude can be diminished by limiting competition between different groups and diminishing facades of rivalry. Groups will experience more empathy in situations where there are common, mutual goals, rather than competition for the same goals. Dialogues of superiority and inferiority have to be set aside in this environment, rather than actively encouraged, as they are in the political arena.

This is obviously very difficult to establish for certain groups, for example: rich and poor, or privilege vs. oppression in race relations. Ironically much of the existing "competition" between these paired groups may be *contributing* towards a growing lack of empathy between them. In this way, the poor who antagonize the rich and "compete" for resources only expose themselves to the risk of decreasing empathy and *schadenfreude*. In a similar vein, the rich who "compete" with the poor for political power expose themselves to the risk of decreasing empathy on the part of the poor and indeed *schadenfreude*. Through competition: both parties proliferate mutual suffering. And indeed, both enjoy watching each other suffer.

One could argue that instead if both see each other in unity, aiming for mutual enrichment as a common goal - empathy would be more readily established. It is difficult to separate these assertions from political undertones. However, the doctrines of empathy pay no attention to colour or creed, or indeed political affiliation. Rather, they are empowered to overcome oppression through mutual empowerment, mutual respect and mutual understanding. It is hoped that through the creation of mutual empathy, social policy can flourish: in that self-interest can decline in favour of common interest or the interests of helping others. Common interest need not entail self sacrifice, as is commonly vaunted. However empathy does make self-sacrifice more tolerable, if required.

This transformation has already occurred at an international level, with the *United Nations* and other institutions aiming for common benefit rather than competition. In this manner peaceful coexistence can be established, moving towards mutual goals and restoring empathy across cultural divides. In international relations it is an idea that harks back to the end of the Cold War, where rival political powers 'competed' for ideological domination. Setting aside this rivalry, Zhou Enlai, Chinese Premier, said that there must be "peaceful coexistence between countries with different political systems".[xl] Instead of competing for the world, countires should aim for "equality" and "mutual benefit".[xli] By reframing the discussion in this manner –from competition to mutual benefit- Enlai helped to establish the beginnings of trade and diplomatic relations between the US and China. He cautioned against competition – which he foresaw led to war and suffering, and proposed five principles of "peaceful coexistence". Former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke once celebrated Enlai's principles. He called the goal of "mutual benefit" something that would create a safer world in a "spirit of cooperation"; something that the world sorely lacked at the time.[xlii]

It is this "spirit of cooperation" that needs to be restored to our day-to-day lives. Instead of competing with rival groups (be they rival ideologies, religions, political groups, cliques and so on) and enjoying watching them suffer, we should instead unite behind our commonality: the spirit of humanity. Simply put, we can unite behind the fact that we are human. Through this unity we can establish empathy.

By ignoring our assigned categories, we can ignore the competitive streak inside each of us, and establish bonds with all sorts of different people, regardless of their background. Once we care for each other, we might treat each other better and establish social policies that benefit the entire country, rather than sectionalized interests. Part of this process is meeting together to talk, to discuss and to gain a mutual understanding of each other regardless of our 'group' affiliations.

Chapter 4: Mending Divisions with Physical Proximity

In previous centuries divisions of society were mended and band-aided by communal meeting areas: Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and other religious and civic halls. The decline of religion, or at least the decline of religious attendance, has seen the decline of these common meeting places for the collective consciousness of mankind. No longer can you strike up a conversation on the weekend with a stranger in a completely unrelated industry in a common place of mutual belief or worship. Even here, the common trait was "shared religion", and so categorical divisions occurred. The modern equivalent of a 'meeting hall' is the local coffee shop, bookstore, shopping centre, park, movie cinema, bowling alley, nightclub etc. But all of these 'meeting halls' are comparatively dull meeting places as compared to the halls of medieval times. What's worse, all are "local" institutions, meaning that a person's exposure is limited to people of a similar demographic background, depending on the demographic diversity of the suburb. Taken at a grander level, cities themselves do not engender the best or most comfortable place to meet or mingle with a diverse variety of strangers. Indeed, the city is a place that often reinforces social boundaries, rather than tearing them down:

> *The huge, rushing aggregate life of a great city – the crushing crowds in the streets, where friends seldom meet and there are few greetings; the thunderous noise of trade and industry that speaks of nothing but gain and competition, and a consuming fever that checks the natural courses of the kindly blood; no leisure anywhere, no quiet, no restful ease, no wise repose – all this shocks us. It is inhumane. It does not appear human… Why should not the city seem infinitely more human than the hamlet? Why should not human traits the more abound where human beings teem millions strong?*
>
> *Because the city curtails man of his wholeness, specializes him, quickens some powers, stunts others, gives him a sharp edge, and a temper like that of steel, makes him unfit for nothing so much as to sit still. Men have indeed written like human beings in the midst of great cities, but not often when they have shared the city's characteristic life, its struggle for place and for gain.*
>
> *…Its haste, its preoccupations, its anxieties, its rushing noise as of men driven, its ringing cries, distract you. It offers no quiet reflection; it permits no retirement to any who share its life. It is a place of little tasks, of narrowed functions, of aggregate and not of individual strength. The great machine dominates its little parts, and its Society is as much of a machine as its business. – Woodrow Wilson.* [xliii]

Such passages as the above raise the inevitable question: how do we reignite a city's life, repose and community spirit? How do we become more *inclusive* in a city that, by its very nature, drives people apart?

One answer is proposed by social psychology. If we can narrow our physical proximity to diverse strangers, we can overcome demographic collectivisation and

'similarities attract' principles that divide our society. To understand the need for physical proximity, it is necessary to establish why we are already living largely separate lives.

The first reason is the strict separation of space amongst the population. Key to this separation is private property. The law in the Western world enforces the idea that each man's "home is his castle". And more so, that any stranger that walks upon private property is trespassing; and thus can be sued for an infringement on ownership. For the last century, the Australian, American and other dreams have been sold to several populations around the world to reinforce this ideology. We are often judged by the homes we buy, the homes we lack and the homes we are currently renting. It is seen as both natural and respectable to desire home ownership. In Australia the current home ownership rate is steady at 70% (it has stayed near 70% since 1971).[xliv] This proliferation of home ownership is grounded in the classic image of white picket fences and the aspiration-induced longing for wealth and prestige.

Leaving aside the historical reasons for this (particularly the fight for private ownership against communist collectivisation), governments have continuously supported the construction of *new homes* - with the creation, particularly in Sydney, of urban sprawl for kilometres to the West. The idea is simply that every man and woman *deserves* a house in which to raise his or her family devoid of inspection, visitation or forced communal interaction.

The trend is for families to split by this principle; kids are meant to leave home and establish their own way, with their own family, in their own house by a respectable age. The rise of apartment living has facilitated this demand. In 2001, 52% of all people living in high-rise apartments lived alone or in a couple without children.[xlv]

By nature of the legal system, it is only by invitation or 'license', that strangers may enter our homes. Licenses can be revoked at any time, after which a stranger is trespassing. This applies to rental agreements and tenancy as well, even though tenants do not *own* the land. The law therefore reinforces the idea that *only people we know* can visit our homes. It is friends, family, associates, colleagues and acquaintances who come visit; it is rarely, if ever, strangers.

> *"Each man, then, does have this peculiar, inalienable right to live his life in his own house in his own way." ~ Frank Lloyd Wright*[xlvi]

This established norm raises two significant dilemmas when it comes to meeting strangers from diverse backgrounds. The first dilemma is one of restricted movement. A recent study found that 90% of the population tend to, on average, visit only three places a day.[xlvii]

> *"When we take into account where we must go (to work, to home, to bed), we have many fewer options for where we **could** go than one might think"*[xlviii]

If our homes are one of the few places we tend to visit each day (and home ownership is so high), then clearly our potential to meet people is already limited.[6] It is often claimed that we have total freedom to interact with strangers, and that if we personally have limited interaction, it is by personal preference. However, the limitations on our daily movements suggest that our choice *is* limited. The choice 'not to' visit a large number of destinations each day is so predominant amongst the population as to make it not really a choice at all, but a common mandate of social interaction. By contrast, our patterns of movement are readily predictable, infrequently changed and in some areas compulsive due to our primary needs of food, income, recreation and sleep. Added to this is limited time. There are 24 hours in a day, and naturally a large proportion has to be spent on work and sleeping, meaning we have *little time* to deal with people, particularly *strangers, who are markedly different to us*. It is far easier to spend time with the familiar: people who are similar, and people we already know.

A solution to community divisions would therefore have to be drawn up with a consistent approach to common human movement. If we have a broad tendency to follow the same daily movement patterns then any increased interaction between different people *must* occur in the areas we visit most; the home, workplace or recreation centres. These three are prime targets because they tap into our existing behavioural patterns, rather than forcing us to adopt new or unusual movements (such as the often proposed 'secular sermons' or other community meeting plans) that would interrupt our daily schedule and have nothing to do with our primary needs. Our frequently visited destinations also have the advantage of providing *physical proximity* in which diverse interactions can be encouraged.

Option 1: Houses

Due to the above legal reasons houses are the *weakest* of the possibilities. Few strangers are legally allowed to enter our homes without permission, and most of our time at home is spent sleeping.

Option 2: Recreation Centres:

There is a common shout, breathless and all but a whisper, for city and urban planners and politicians to facilitate more pedestrian space, more space where people *can* in fact interact with each other. If urban planners construct environments that are beautiful aesthetically, moving emotionally and functional in bringing people together, then perhaps we *could* foster diversity in big cities through physical proximity. Perhaps planners could encourage *us*, through public space, to greet more, share ideas, and better understand each other through the sharing of unique beliefs and cultures. It is through public space, after all, that most of our interactions occur with strangers, including interactions of silence for silence. Equally, it is in public that we can "experience face-to-face mixing and mingling of people" that remind us of our

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[6] Our capacity to meet strangers on the Internet at home, and thereby 'welcome them into our home' is addressed in more detail in a later chapter.

"diversity" and our "commonality as equals", not adversaries.[xlix] Public space can therefore help bind the community together, rather than driving it apart.

Take for example *Multicultural* or *World Fairs* that bring people together from all races and cultures to celebrate diversity. The *Australian National Multicultural Festival* for instance, does just that. The *Minister for Multicultural Affairs* describes the event as follows:

> *"Whether it's through food, dance, fun, performances or cultural activities [we] will all **unite** to bring to life a spectacular event for everyone to enjoy."[l]*
> (Emphasis added)

Perhaps in the reverie of multicultural celebration we can experience "interpersonal unity, wherein the conception of self and other are not distinct but are merged".[li] This concept, as expressed in chapter 2, is the highest form of empathy, where we view each other not as separate, but as part of a collective humanity. The contention is that when we celebrate our differences together, we also recognize our similarities. We gain a perception of how similar we each are, how our cultures interact as part of a collective history of humanity and how we share a collective space in the wider Australian society. In this way we perceive each other *not* as disparate and distinct, but as part of a rich tapestry of individuality. Through interaction in close physical proximity we break down traditional exclusionary practices and isolationist regimes. Crucially, these events tap into our existing behavioural norms. Hosted in public parks and squares, they are located in places we bypass in our daily lives. They cater to our basic need for food and entertainment, and are not too burdensome to visit.

Festivals and multicultural days are annual, rather than continuous. Social psychologists however, tell us that one off events **are not enough** to fight prejudice.[lii] Prejudicial attitudes are only reduced by *consistent* contact over time.[liii] We must therefore look to a more fundamental, permanent and continual public space. We must continually welcome different cultures to this space, foster interaction and build a sense of empathy and mutual understanding. In that vein one solution would be a permanent cultural fair, a park or public place that continually has different cultures intermingling.

Multi-Religion Spaces:

The same argument can be made of *Interfaith* or multi-religious spaces. By creating spaces of physical proximity we can overcome our traditional barriers created by religious difference, and bring people from many different religions together into the same venue. These spaces already exist, and one such space is the *Interfaith Centre of Melbourne*:

> *"The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne recognises and celebrates the **unity** that is found in our diversity, that is, the **unity** of human values which are found at the ethical core of each faith."[liv]* (Emphasis added)

It is this *unity of faiths* that can lead to empathy between disparate religious groups and mutual understanding between traditionally "rival" religious populations. Instead of religions being exclusionary pursuits, pursued individually, they become a part of a

fundamental core of society. Instead of religions serving their own interests, they create empathy between each other and secular groups, and thereby serve the community broadly. These types of interfaith spaces are mostly created for one off events. More fundamental and permanent links need to be established between religious and secular institutions.[lv] In this manner, discussions on fundamental questions should not be solitary pursuits led by religious leaders. They should be community activities: open, shared and inclusive, and in public spaces, where a vast variety of people can contribute.

Small-Scale Urban Planning:

Along with large plans come the smaller and more everyday examples that politicians and urban planners may implement. These are spaces that make the public interact: consider giant scrabble boards, chess sets, light shows and the like. These encourage strangers to enter a space together, greet and meet each other and so on.

Cafes and Restaurants:

We can look to urban planners and politicians to create social diversity, or we can look to a broader base of implementation that already exists, that of the community itself. Restaurant and café owners (and other recreational facilities) can themselves invigorate social interaction and diversity through the implementation of new social norms.

Take for example *Metro St. James* café in Sydney, which implemented a rule that customers could get their meal or coffees for free if they gave each other a kiss.[lvi] The idea was novel and largely reported at the time (Valentine's day of course), but it poses a distinctly creative way in which cafes and restaurants can control their physical spaces. By imposing new social norms (kissing for coffees), these spaces can alter existing behaviours and formulate (voluntarily) the creation of closer relationships in the community.

One could imagine a similar rule for the encouragement of social diversity. Simply, the idea of a discount offered every time you successfully introduce yourself to at least one person in the room. By imposing a social rule, recreation centres can become not only the host of friends and acquaintances but the host of the entire community; encouraging interaction between and within the community itself, regardless of demographic background, interest, ideology etc.

Keeping this in mind, it is therefore quite logical that the philosopher Allain de Botton proposes the solution of the Greek *Agape* Restaurant. A restaurant in which social rules are overturned:

> *Such a restaurant would have an open door, a modest entrance fee and an attractively designed interior ... the groups and ethnicities into which we commonly segregate ourselves would be broken up; family members and couples would be spaced apart, and kith favoured over kin. Everyone would be safe to approach and address, without fear of rebuff or reproach. By simple virtue of occupying the same space, guests would – as in a church – be signalling their allegiance to a spirit of community and friendship.*

Such a proposal is attractive mainly because it imposes social rules and regulations that mitigate common trends of staying within one's own 'tribe'. Forced to stay apart from their own family, close friends and lovers, people will naturally be inclined to socialise more readily with strangers. The idea of a large table in particular promotes a spirit of 'dinner party' reverie much the antithesis of common cafés, which tend to impose a strict 'two person' seating arrangement.

This idea has already been emulated in several cities around the world. Sydney's own *Table for Twenty* invites you to sit at a communal table of strangers for an intimate dinner party with people you've never met. It claims to reinvent "the idea of the evening meal" by mixing total strangers with close friends, and potentially making everyone friends by the end of the evening.[lvii] Owner Michael Fantuz says: "it's a good excuse to get to know people and really aims to move away from [the usual] private, single table dining experience to something more laid back and communal."[lviii] People from all walks of life come to the restaurant and it acts as a big family dinner table: sharing plates around and dishing up for others is expected, rather than opposed. Restaurants are one of the few places where strangers gather in quiet, intimate settings, even if tables apart. The idea that we can harness this physical proximity that already exists -to encourage diversity- is both intuitive and seductive to those wishing to foster diverse communities. Every restaurant is unlikely to become 'communal' overnight, though there can still be a push for one communal table at each restaurant we go to. By having one table as 'communal', customers can choose if they would like to sit together or apart, and individual autonomy can be retained.

Option 3: Workplaces:

In the workplace divisions occur primarily along industry lines. Law firms exist in their own buildings, as do banks and other corporate entities: and in terms of physical proximity there is often very little crossover between disparate corporations. While overlap does occur in certain industries that rely upon each other for production, resources or clients, generally industries 'get on with the job at hand' within their own *physical* space, to the exclusion of all others.

The root of this separatist mindset is the idea of specialisation, and by extension the classic concept of the division of labour. The idea is that the economy benefits if we narrowly define our job descriptions. If each worker specialises to become "masters" in their chosen speciality, there will be an increase in production and output overall because people (when specialised) become incredibly fast at producing their niche product. Division of labour has an unintended consequence, and the consequence is in the name. It divides people into defined specialisations, thus decreasing the likelihood of interconnection and broadly: the capacity of workers to navigate within and across industry divides. Instead of dynamic, flexible and interrelated workplaces, workers are often limited to meeting people within their own *defined specialist area* and other closely related fields. By extension, specialist fields develop into specialist industries, which create even larger barriers when they move into their own premises.

Outsourcing is a logical extension of this, where the most specialised and highly skilled employees are hired on a one-off or temporary basis to plug a hole in production. Outsourcing and casualisation decrease worker interaction and reinforce

the norm of strict separatism, decreasing the amount of time individual workers spend with one another. Hired on a temporary basis, a freelancer or casual worker may never form friendships or relationships in the workplace and may instead remain a constant outsider. Indeed, it is rare for casual staff to ever properly integrate into a company's core culture, largely because they lack incentives and constant physical presence to do so.

Company culture itself can become an exclusionary force, not only to casual staff but to all staff who do not 'fit' or 'meet' certain cultural requirements. Company culture is similar to a vision statement; it sets out the ideal hiring process, what drives the hiring and who specifically 'fits the criteria' for the company. Often companies have a public "cultural" or mission statement claiming that they are "diverse", "inclusive" and stating that they hire "anyone" as long as they have a certain "work ethic", "determination", "talent" or "flare".[lix] On this basis, you would expect most companies to be very diverse spaces, filled with people from a diverse range of industries and all walks of life.

Why is this not the case?

The first reason is dress code. An employee generally has to fit a particular "look", if they don't fit the 'look', they don't get the job. Professional industries require interviewees to dress in a suit, for instance. A few IT and creative firms require a "dressed down" appearance instead. "What should I wear?" is one of the most commonly asked questions prior to an interview. "Dress code" therefore acts as an instantaneous limitation on any claim of "diversity" in a company's culture. An honest company would admit: "Yes, we are diverse, but only in so far as you fit a particular 'look'." Dress is one of the most superficial judgments of a person, and so to have it as one of the most defining features of the hiring process is somewhat irrational, particularly because it can be changed *so easily*. Would it not be expedient if someone is the best candidate to simply tell them to change their clothes? By this measure a diverse range of candidature can be accepted, even if conformity is demanded when they start the job.

Beyond the surface demands of "dressing well", "hard work", "people skills" and the like, come the more subtle nuances of a company's internal culture. In Australia, drinking and sport are often fused with company culture in so far as weekly drinks, touch football or team sport are included as part of a package of "social activities". While on the surface these activities are inclusive, on closer inspection they are fairly exclusionary. What of someone who's religion bans them from drinking? What of someone with a disability or illness who cannot partake in social sport? What of someone who dislikes these activities? Again the issue of "interests" and "similarities" arises, where a company is catering to a certain population; a population that shares a core set of "interests" and similarities, rather than a diverse *range* of interests. Considering that these social activities may **attract** a certain kind of candidate to begin with, and therefore limit the candidate pool, the company's culture may not be as "inclusive" or "diverse" as claimed. Furthermore, drinking and sporting events are used for social leveraging and networking, meaning that people who do not fit this IDEAL may not be able to advance far in the workplace. An environment like this poses the risk of "ingroup" formation (an ingroup forming who go to these functions, with a large amount of upward mobility) and "outgroup" formation (an

outgroup who do not "fit" the company's internal culture). To prevent this… workplaces should provide a diverse *range* of activities, so as to attract, keep, and promote a diverse range of individuals. This would be logical extension of a company's commitment to "diversity". Broad offerings result in broad candidature. To give examples: at any drinking event, non-alcoholic alternatives could be offered, and alongside touch football, other social activities could be organised such as talks, parties, functions etc… to cater for a diversity of tastes.

Beyond dress code and internal company culture is the natural limitation that companies only operate in a single industry. A company is only as diverse as the employees it hires and hence a company in a very niche field, hiring only niche-field employees, will not be diverse. Most employees at a company will share the same career aspirations (to work in that particular industry). Again, here we have diversity being limited by "similar interests". Even if different *positions* are offered (say a secretary in a law firm) an employee may still share the same interest in the industry as a whole (the same interest in law). Diversity of 'positions' is therefore not *real* diversity, for a company may have a plethora of staff in a plethora of positions who *all* share the same interests. *Actual diversity* requires a diversity of interests, activities and positions (alongside the traditional diversity of culture, gender, race etc…).

It is questionable whether this kind of diversity can ever exist in the workplace so long as "company culture" is highly valued. Todd McKinnon, CEO of *Okta* for instance, argues that CEOs should:

> "*Reward employees who advance your culture, and be open and honest with those who don't… steer hiring decisions for the people who will maintain that [culture's] success".*[7]

If people don't "fit" the company culture they will be discouraged in their position, fired or encouraged to conform. None of these is conducive to diversity. Strict hiring along "cultural" lines promotes cultural conformity, rather than cultural diversity. This conformity makes workplaces exclusive communities, rather than inclusive of broader segments of society. One solution to this is do away with culture altogether or make diversity in the broad sense a cultural requirement.

To this end we can look to the "culture" of co-habiting workspaces. Sydney *Vibewire* hosts an "innovation lab" where corporate diversity is encouraged. It is a lab of innovative thinkers and a place that brings:

> "*creative and technical entrepreneurs, students, artists, filmakers and designers, engineers and accountants together to create a vibrant and diverse workplace.*"[8]

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[7] *Todd McKinnon, CEO of Okta, 'How To Build a Great Company Culture', Forbes Magazine, (10/04/2013)*
[8] 'Vibewire: The Future of Work', *Vibewire*, (October 14, 2013)
<http://vibewireinnovationlab.com/?p=2810>

The benefit of collaborative workspaces is that they allow multiple companies to do business under the same roof, and allow a variety of people to interact. These interactions can lead to unexpected innovations, creativity and collaboration. Instead of the workplace being exclusive, it becomes an inclusive place that welcomes many "cultures" into the same space, thus creating a broader homogenous culture of "diversity" and "inclusivity", above conformity.

Option 4: Universities:

Specialisation of the workforce begins at Universities and other Tertiary schools, where students pick Degrees or Diplomas in their "chosen" profession. Often a student's choice is made with the aim, or hope, of entering that profession on graduation (so Architecture students aim to be architects and so on). In theory, this is practical. In practice, it narrows a student's perspective when it comes to concepts outside their chosen industry. It also reduces the capacity of students to intermingle, and creates new 'categories' and barriers within society on faculty and industry lines. Students, limited to their own faculty, tend to befriend those within their own faculty, rather than a more diverse range of peers. In terms of physical proximity, students are limited in class to meeting those in the same degree, rather than others in the school.

In reality, students tend to break this trend and move outside their "defined" (And degree-specified) line of work when they graduate. Current estimates predict that most students will have up to twenty jobs in their lifetime.[lx] Crucially, a student's *original* job may not fall within their "chosen" profession (or may not even relate to their degree at all). Keeping this in mind, it becomes obvious that to prepare students for the world they will face, students need to learn a diversity of ideas from a diversity of faculties. Bringing students together in this way would have the benefit of allowing faculty-categorised disparate groups to interact and socialise. Once students gain the opportunity to socialise across divides, they will begin to realise that they *all have similarities* and again through physical proximity, become friends with one another. Through interconnecting students: industries themselves can become more closely intertwined. In short, a student's natural inclination to stick to people within their own industry can be overcome by mixing students of all faculties.

Mixing students and offering a generalist education has already occurred in many institutions, particularly through the creation of Gen Ed courses. Gen Ed is a system that allows students to study electives outside their faculty as a component of their degree. In this way, a science student can take up French on the side, or an Arts students can delve into business. The *University of New South Wales* claims that "a general education complements the more specialised learning undertaken in a student's chosen field of study." Along with traditional professional skills, students gain a diversity of complementary knowledge that expand them both professionally and intellectually. Gen Ed is however limited to a few subjects across a degree. Hence, unless a student is willing to take up an entire new/second degree, they'll never be exposed to the full range of subjects in a different course. This poses a dilemma, particularly for the generalist or "renaissance" student.

Student communities are currently helping to plug this gap. Students at ANU in Canberra for instance have created the Cross-Disciplinary Students Academy (XSA).

XSA represents students "interested in exploring different perspectives" and those who wish "not to be confined" to their degree. By welcoming students to talk from a variety of different backgrounds (from the Arts, Science, Law, Medicine, Engineering, Music etc) XSA fights against the deficiencies of "over-specialisation" in modern tertiary education. Instead of producing narrow minded and specialised students, XSA encourages diversity, collaboration and "open discussion", treating all industries as equally fascinating. It presumes that each industry has interesting knowledge, and that this knowledge "is valuable" when shared. More, it recognises that when people from different backgrounds come together, something brilliant is created. A space of unity is created in the shared celebration of ideas.

Speeches, discussion groups and lectures occur between students of different faculties and by this means knowledge is shared. The process is most rewarding because it ignores the differences in industries and unites them together: often sparking talks mixing various ideas. Politics can be combined with technology for instance, which can be combined with science, or engineering or music or law. Together, different ideas merge and form something new, something altogether unexpected. By crossing faculty divides new solutions are discovered for broad societal problems. Policy discussion can occur between social sciences and hard sciences and engineering students. It is this combination of faculties that sparks creativity. Just like a creative team, students come together with specialised knowledge, but by sharing that knowledge, the entire team benefits. The output of the team is stronger, more cohesive and more innovative than the output of any single team member. Such is the beauty of collaboration.

There are several arguments against "diverse discussion groups". The strongest is that of the corporate university itself: that university is a place of professional development rather than a place of personal enrichment. In light of the increasingly educated population, and the increasing demands of a requisite degree to get a job, some universities have begun to view students as clients instead of people… as part of a business model of delivering a "service" of education. By this measure, any extra-curricular activity is a waste of time that gets in the way of acquiring professional certification.

This model of education is inhibitive in two ways. Firstly, it prevents the flourishing of creativity and innovation that is so central a tenant to the founding principles of universities. Secondly, by disparaging extra-curriculars, the corporate university fights against its own mandate. With the increasing demands of employers, it is actually a *benefit* not a *detriment* to the "client" (student) to receive a broader, generalist style of education. Extra-curricular activities in particular appear on CV's (and are so advised to do so by career counsellors), because they show a student's well-roundedness, their ability to achieve things outside of the bounds of traditional education. Indeed, the University of Sydney's Vice Chancellor Dr. Michael Spence once wrote in defense of clubs and societies that they "offer students the chance to acquire all sorts of additional skills that employers value, not least the ability to juggle [a student's] time between their study and the very many other things that keep them busy on campus!"[lxi] I would add to this that student discussion groups in particular, allow students to interact and become friends with people they otherwise would never meet. The true mark of a university is not in the courses it offers, or the business-like manner in which it efficiently dispenses students upon the world, but in the manner in

which it forges friendships that last a lifetime. And that, with the benefit of hindsight, is what allows students to go on and forge lifelong business relations, networks and a general sense of connectedness with each other upon graduation; a sense of connection sorely lacking in the rest of the community.

Option 5: Schools:

A study of German adults after World War II found that those adults exposed to outsiders -people outside of their own 'race' or 'religion'- at a young age were more likely to hide away Jews in their homes and thereby deceive Nazi authorities.[lxii] Since that study, several others have reaffirmed the idea that when we are exposed to diversity at a very young age we are more likely to accept others, and are more likely to act in assistance of "outsiders"; people who are different to us. Ironically, this proves that there is a tiny bit of credibility to the old claim that a person is not racist, homophobic etc, because "I have a friend who is [insert category here]". While having a friend of a minority or another group may make you more *likely* to be accepting of others (especially in your childhood), it is not, as these people tend to suggest, a blanket guarantee of being a decent human being. Still, the more friends we have that are different to ourselves, the more accepting we tend to become of other groups. This tendency has been proven in psychological testing.[lxiii] Even if it is only a *tendency*, it is a tendency worth nurturing in the population if we are to ever have an inclusive community built on empathy and mutual respect.

By contrast, if we grow up in a homogenous society (a place where everyone shares the same demographic features of race, religion etc) we will not receive this 'tendency' of becoming a more accepting individual. In fact, people who grow up in homogenous societies and develop prejudicial views are less likely to become friends with outsiders, and more likely to stick to their own. Prejudicial adults are less likely to help outsiders. And it can be hypothesized that they are also less likely to empathise with outsiders. Instead of empathizing, they may focus on the outsider group's "otherness", develop a sense of xenophobia and even go so far as to discriminate.

In homogenous communities, the dynamic of "us" vs. "them" can also thrive, where the outsider can be seen as a threat to the community's continued survival or the community's culture. So in the instance of refugees mentioned in a previous chapter, people of other races were seen as a security risk to the majority white homogenous community of the Queensland countryside. By framing it as an "us" vs. "them", the life or death plight of refugees can be simplified and dehumanized as part of the "othering" process.

Keeping the above paragraphs in mind, it becomes obvious that the best thing we can do for our kids is to let them grow up in a diverse community, a place filled with people who are different to ourselves. In fact, it is best that we 'normalise' difference as early as possible, so that differences between kids is not particularly significant or determinative as they grow. Once difference is normalized, it becomes increasingly easier for kids to start to see themselves as unified, and develop empathy and mutual understanding for one another.

To this end it becomes worrying to observe the large number of religious, cultural, single sex and other divisive schooling systems in Western education. Instead of letting kids interact with people who are different to themselves, we build systems that promote homogeneity. The homogeneity of these communities is however a façade in that it does not reflect the reality that students will face when they graduate. Instead it is an artificial semblance of sameness, where "others" are not allowed. Others are strictly prohibited to the point where the school does not reflect the real world, yet when students graduate they are expected to integrate, care for and not suffer from prejudice, racist or sexist attitudes. Given we know inclusive communities have a tendency to encourage empathy, why do we still allow *exclusive,* homogenous schools to exist? Surely it is illogical to encourage artificial homogeneity in a multicultural society?

Religious schools in particular have been criticised for being exclusionary, reinforcing social boundaries and disallowing young people the opportunity to meet, understand and interact with people outside their own sect. While many religions have the same core aims and truths, these commonalities are lost in a system of competitive struggle for "my truth over yours" in schooling. Exclusion is formulated on the basis of atheists being ignorant of the truth of God, theists being ignorant of the truth that God doesn't exist and other religions being ignorant of the truth that their God is not *THE* God. This overt simplification is catered to by the government's legislation on schooling. Despite our constitutional right to freedom of religion or perhaps because of it, religious schools are exempted from anti-discrimination legislation, when accepting new students.[lxiv] A school can reject you, as it goes, for not being religious enough. This caters to exclusionary practices and the deterioration of mutual respect and understanding.

In NSW, often a student requires one or more grandparents of the school's faith before they can enroll. The stated aim of religious schools is to further that particular religion in society, to the exclusion of other beliefs within their own walls.[lxv] It may be said that this discrimination helps parents who want their children raised in a particular sect. According to the *National Catholic Education Commission* of Australia, religious schools "fulfill parents' rights in a democratic, free society to choose the schooling for their children which reflects their own values, beliefs and hopes as Australians".[lxvi] Outside influences and secular influences, it is argued, may lead children astray from their parent's chosen religious path. However, this argument dismisses the likelihood that enlightenment is founded upon debate and dialogue between conflicting perspectives. It is only through debate between religions, that some eternal truth of thought may be discovered, or some rationality may be founded.

John Stuart Mill once wrote that:

> *"In the case of any person whose judgment is really deserving of confidence, how has it become so? Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct. Because it has been his practice to listen to all that could be said against him; to profit by as much of it as was just, and expound to himself, and upon occasion to others, the fallacy of what was fallacious. Because he has felt, that the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said*

about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind." [lxvii]

It is this openness to other's opinions that should form the cornerstone of primary and secondary education. Instead of religious schools, isolated and exclusionary of others, we should form schools where peoples of all religions can come together to learn from each other's faiths and principles, challenge their own convictions and discover truths of their own faith through rationality and contestation of ideas.

It is true that religious schools remain dominant largely for secular reasons; in NSW they perform better, and parents often send their children there for secular reasons as opposed to religious affiliation.[lxviii] In challenging this status quo, there may need to be a rise of secular non-government schools that cater to the demands of parents. A reallocation of resources is a contentious proposition. Instead, religious schools might merely stop preferencing members of their own denomination. In this way, a gradual shift in student demographic can take place, catering to the demands of the local community rather than the demands of a particular religious demographic. The school may keep its stated religion, but offer classes in other religious studies to all students as a method of broadening a student's exposure to outside groups. A consequence of this would be greater inter-group empathy in society broadly, as students learn more about each other's religions, and understand each other better.

Even if a school is not specifically a religious institution, it may still pander to exclusionary practices. In NSW, the *Department for Education and Communitie*s allows Government (non-denominational, non-religious) schools to teach 'generalist religious education' and 'specialist religious education'.[lxix] For specialist education the NSW statute mandates that "children attending a religious education class are to be ***separated*** from other children at the school while the class is held".[lxx] This practice dates back to 1880, when the NSW government declared that "in all cases the pupils who receive religious instruction shall be separated from the other pupils of the school".[lxxi] It must be asked of this ancient tradition, *why?* Why must religious students be separated from other students during religious classes? Surely this goes against the very nature of encouraging mutual understanding of religious faiths and principles?

The idea of separation pays credence to the idea that there is nothing to learn from another person's religion. Yet comparative studies of religion have revealed extraordinary findings in the past. It is the ancient Sumerian myth of flooding in modern day Iraq that may lend credence to the biblical story of Noah's great flood, for instance.[lxxii] A verse of Sumerian myth was found in 1872 that predates the bible, and modern archeological evidence adds weight to the idea of a flood, by suggesting that ancient "devastating floods did sometimes take place in Mesopotamia".[lxxiii] Without this type of comparative religious study, no such consideration could ever have occurred. This is one example in a field consisting of thousands. Concurrent education, and comparative study actually *builds* and *fosters* a religious education, rather than destroying it.

In secular terms, the atheist has much to gain, in terms of understanding and respect, from being steeped in the cultural and religious traditions of others. Just as the religious student has much to gain from being taught secular ethics, morality and the

criminal law. It is shared wisdom, debate and discussion that should be the cornerstone of Australian multiculturalism, not exclusion and isolation.

Instead of separating students into different religious classes, students at government schools should sample each 'specialist' religious class on a rotational basis. This would compliment rather than conflict with the generalist religious and ethical teaching already offered. It would compliment NSW government policy, for schools are required to have "inclusive teaching practices which... promote an open and tolerant attitude towards different cultures, religions and world views."[lxxiv] Inclusivity requires shared venues for discussion and debate, rather than exclusionary venues of isolated mono-thought. By sampling a taste of each religion, students can gain an opportunity to form bonds of friendship across traditional religious boundaries and foster mutual empathy and understanding between traditionally competing religious populations.

Chapter 5: Connection in the Digital Age – Why Not Use The Internet?

There is a common argument in favour of technology: If we are divided, surely *technology* can solve the problem? Surely technology can bridge the gaps between different groups? Connection *need not be* face-to-face if *artificial connection* is sufficient.

The most obvious example is the Internet. As the epithet goes, it is the 'World Wide' Web, bringing incredibly diverse people together at a common meeting place; in the surf, so to speak. The grand narrative of the Internet goes that the internet is a place of constant, intensive and diverse social interactions with a variety of people from a diverse variety of geographic backgrounds. Rather than being attracted to those similar to us (as we are in the physical world), on the Internet we are assumed to be open to everyone, inclusive and extroverted, meeting and interacting with a large diversity of strangers on a daily basis. This narrative has been propounded in one way or another, at one time or another, by the creators of the Internet: Tim Berner's Lee, Bob Kahn, Vint Cerf, and Leonard Kleinrock:

> *You can look at [the Internet] as a technical system. But… looking at it as humanity connected by technology is perhaps a more reasonable and useful way to look at it. ~ Tim Berner's Lee*[lxxv]

> *[The Internet] is part of the social fabric of the world. ~* Bob Kahn[lxxvi]

> *The Internet is for everyone. [It] offers a global megaphone for voices that might otherwise be heard only feebly. It invites and facilitates multiple points of view and dialogue. ~* Vint Cerf[lxxvii]

> *The Internet creates communities. It is a place where communities form. ~* Leonard Kleinrock

The problem with this grand narrative is that it propounds the idea that the Internet is a place of social connection. This is largely true. However, if we focus *narrowly* on the use of the Internet as a tool for encouraging *diversity*, as a place to meet diverse strangers, then this concept begins to break down. While the Internet has the *capacity* to achieve diversity, often it re-entrenches existing social divisions.

Evidence suggests that people use the Internet with a purpose, often to fulfil a personal desire. Some of the most common usages include: the use of emails, search engines, social media, research, online purchases, movies or entertainment (and games) or reading the news, reviews, articles or other sources of information. Most of these do not provide opportunities to meet diverse strangers. Emails, news, videos and research for instance are solitary activities, and while we might encounter strangers along the way, (for example, in comment sections), it is questionable whether these people are fundamentally different to ourselves.

The truth is that online, as much as in the real world, we still perpetuate our instinct to seek out similarity rather than difference. In fact, the online space is the perfect place for people to gather as a unified and collective 'tribe'. Most online communities form

based on the similarity of their user base. Consider: sporting sites, religious sites, motoring sites, music sites, corporate networking sites, 'meetup' sites, dating sites, gaming sites, professional sites, funny video/comedy sites, political party sites and so on. Even social media -the hallmark of 'meeting strangers online'- has its own groupings of 'similar' strangers based on the 'likes', 'birthplaces', 'schools' and 'institutions' each belong to. Through friending and following, these sites allow us to build up a web of people who, if not exactly like us, generally share a few *core* similarities, interests and often, real world proximity. Social media 'friends' are often first met in real life.[9] The meeting of actual strangers on social media sites (excluding friends of friends) is minimal.

Along with seeking similar people, there is also a tendency for us to seek online news that affirms our belief systems, rather than challenging our beliefs.[lxxviii] News we agree with is more "accessible", and we tend to spend more time reading it. This results in interactions online – on news sites – with commentators we already agree with, rather than discussions with people who have different views. While this is still a "connection" to another human being, it is essentially a self-affirming connection, one that may result in an affirmation of narrow minded thinking.

The people who most often cite the Internet as a place of *real* 'social connection' are often themselves in the business of providing such services: social media sites, online forums, dating sites and other 'meetup' groups. The problem is not that these companies are lying in as much as that the Internet is only *occasionally* used for these purposes. Generally, such relationships would be fostered faster in the real world. Furthermore, accidental communication, or 'bumping into' someone, is much less likely online than in real life. It is much easier online to ignore, hide or 'block' people we dislike and don't want to talk to. This makes it easy to ignore people who are different to us. The online space is self-tailored. We choose who can "see" us, who can "friend" us, who can "chat" to us. We can tailor away those who are disagreeable, or boring – and connect with those who are similar.

Studies of social media show that "similarity" is a key indicator of friendship online.[lxxix] Teenagers tend to befriend those who live or work close to them, and are of a similar age, demographic and so on, even though such 'barriers' aren't meant to exist online. However, the strongest indicator of online friendship is "interests".[lxxx] The reason for this is quite simple: people present "interests" predominantly in their social media profiles.

> *"Personal home page authors try to present an online portrait of themselves, working with a palette of design elements like guestbooks, banners [i.e. backgrounds], favorite links, and other Web addons."*[lxxxi]

It is this online representation of a user's identity that allows other users to connect. So when they present their interest in a sport, another user may connect with them based on that interest. A recent *MySpace* study found that "those who applied a very specific background, such as military, were often soldiers in the military and listed

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[9] Yun Huang, Cuihua Shen, Noshir S. Contractor, 'Distance Matters: Exploring proximity and homophily in virtual world networks', *Decision Support Systems* (2013), 55, 4, 969-977.

friends who were also enlisted".[lxxxii] The same was found of athletes. Beyond occupations, users may list movies, books, groups, activities and other 'interests' to establish their online identity. Profile pictures, as the final layer of this self-identification often establish the age-range of the user. This allows strangers the chance to "browse" a person's identity before deciding to befriend them. In this "browsing" process, similar interests can rise to the fore of criteria for friendship selection, as well as 'mutual friends'.

A focus on "interests" as opposed to other factors such as physical location (which the internet diminishes the importance of), does allow for a semblance of diversity within the confines of that single category. So people from different states or countries might come together in the same band appreciation group, or people of different ages might express the same interest in a range of activities, and meet and talk about such activities online.

The foundation of this is the site's own Graphical User Interface and what exactly a user displays about themselves. If age, race, income bracket, demographic and so on are all voluntarily and prominently displayed by the user, then this could decrease the likelihood of others –who are not part of these groups- befriending the user. This would particularly be true if strangers dislike one of the groups the user belongs to – for instance if the stranger is a racist, and the user is of a minority race.

To mitigate this pre-judgment process, users should be encouraged to upload as little information about themselves as possible to online sites. If they limit their information to 'interests' alone, then they will purely be judged on those interests as opposed to identity features. This could facilitate 'friendships' across traditional societal dividers, and diminish the importance of categorical distinction.

Even at this minimal level, people will still unite behind categories of 'similar' interest. Hence, to get rid of this final layer of similarity, online users could simply conduct communication anonymously. Anonymity prevents pre-judgment and facilitates discussion between people who may be very different from each other. Here I note the proliferation of anonymous comment threads on YouTube, Reddit and other forums where users subsume their identity. It is in these environments that communications between diverse strangers flourish – particularly for those too shy, intimidated or scared to talk publicly under the banner mast of their identity. Anonymous spaces are devoid of banning, blocking, defriending and so on but are merely spaces of discussion. It is here, on online forums, that words become the last and only criteria by which someone is judged.

I hesitate to suggest that these forums are an actual "solution" to the problem. Indeed, without knowing who someone is, it is quite hard to empathise with the 'experience' of living their life, if not impossible. In fact, anonymous comments can become

vitriolic and hateful. Hiding all difference and pretending we have no identities at all also seems to move against a process of 'celebrating diversity'.

Websites may however, allow for a more *global* unifying movement and the creation of a community that need not abide by geographic location or physical proximity. This is the great advantage of the web.

Book 2

The Culture of Social Isolation

Chapter 6: The Dangers of Social Isolation and How We Treat Strangers

Humans need each other in order to survive. Not necessarily in a physical sense, but in a deeply psychological sense. Time spent apart from each other is destructive in an ultimate way; we tend to lose our minds. We are generally happier when in close contact with others, and especially so when we have a supportive structure of close relationships.[lxxxiii] By contrast, we tend to feel higher levels of negative emotions and feelings of loneliness, isolation and even depression, when we are left alone.[lxxxiv] We have an evolutionary "need to belong" and a "strong aversion to social exclusion" because social connection allows us to *depend* upon others for food and security.[lxxxv] It is no surprise, therefore, that being left alone harms us emotionally, and in being so harmed – we may act out.

In all of the various random shootings that occur in America and elsewhere, one of the single, startlingly consistent features is that the perpetrators are almost always *lonely and isolated*.[lxxxvi] Often they have few, if any, real friends and often they are estranged from family or loved ones. It is no surprise to discover that "criminologists have known for decades that building and maintaining relationships with socially accepted people is the best way to prevent violence."[lxxxvii] The evidence suggests that social exclusion can lead to feelings of loneliness and alienation, which can cause depression and mental illness, which can predicate criminal activity.[lxxxviii] In truth, when an individual has violent tendencies and is left alone, they gain an opportunity to fantasize and develop strategies of how to bring their crime to fruition. One particular school shooter (name withheld) "fuelled his violent fantasies while hidden away in a windowless bunker plastered with posters of guns and tanks."[10][lxxxix] Another described that he had "nothing to live for", before surrendering to police.[xc] Still another launched a "manifesto" of "nihilism, hate, and disillusion with society" online.[xci] He was later described as a "shy, lonely young man".[xcii] Still another was described by peers as "quiet and as someone who would not respond when others greeted him."[xciii]

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[10] I think it is wrong to name the perpetrators for risk of 'celebrating' their deeds. If

you wish to see their names then seek the original source material.

Research on 15 shootings from 1995-2001 revealed "acute or chronic rejection -in the form of ostracism, bullying, and/or romantic rejection- was present in all but two… incidents".[xciv] This alienation and rejection is often grounded in cultural differences, demographic differences or differences in personal interest between the shooter and those they kill. "I don't have a single American friend," said the Boston bomber in a photo essay, years before the attack, "I don't understand them".[xcv] It is important to note here that ostracism and bullying is often predicated on the idea *that people are different to us, and that we must therefore treat them differently –and often cruelly- to emphasise this difference.* When people are left out and treated as different to the majority they can sometimes resort to desperate acts of crime and violence to gain attention, recognition or revenge.

In Australia where guns are largely illegal to own and use, violence still occurs, it just is left unrecognized. Self-harm and suicide are themselves a form of violent desperation that people resort to in very similar circumstances of alienation, loneliness and mental illness. Just because suicide cases are not splashed across the media does not mean that they are any less important than massacres or shootings. In fact, they are arguably more so. Silent deaths account for six deaths *a day* in this country, and somewhere between 2132 and 2500 *a year.*[xcvi] "Suicide is the leading cause of death in Australia for men under 44 and women under 34".[xcvii] And yet we barely ever hear about it on the news, even in a peripheral sense.

Instead of solving this crisis of isolation, social exclusion and personal violence, we are perpetuating its cause. Ever since the 1970s campaigns have consistently been raised about "Stranger Danger".[xcviii] Police emphasize "safety messages" regarding the dangers that strangers pose to our children, with abduction and sexual abuse being of primary concern.[xcix] This is despite the fact that "85 per cent" of child abuse cases occur with "someone known to or trusted by the child".[c] Crucially, the extreme messages of "never talk to strangers" (regardless of context) encourage an atmosphere of distrust within the community more generally. Nancy McBride of the *National Center for Missing and Exploited Children* suggests that we should instead teach our children to "recognize and avoid *certain situations, rather than certain people*".[ci] It is not strangers *generally* that are dangerous, it is strangers who perform particular actions to vulnerable children.

A campaign that makes us greet people in the street, treat strangers with a degree of kindness, civility and respect and talk to people who are quiet by nature (albeit not go home with anyone, or anywhere else, and not accepting anything from them), would do more to prevent crime than our current tactic. Particularly (as discussed above) because alienation itself is a leading cause of crime. John Kerlatec, *Sex Crimes Squad Commander Superintendant of NSW* suggests, "There is no specific profile of what a 'stranger' may look like… so children and their parents need to focus on what a person may *say or do* rather than [their] appearance."[cii] It is the dangerous *actions* of strangers, rather than the dangers of common civility, which children need protection from.

By perpetuating an *atmosphere of fear and paranoia*, we are contributing to the creation of criminal activity:

> *How much of the anxiety now endemic in big-cities stems from a fear of*
> *"real" crime and how much from a sense that the street is disorderly, a source*

of worrisome encounters… [When] residents think that crime, especially violent crime, is on the rise… they will modify their behaviour. [Residents] will use the streets less often… will stay apart from [strangers], move with averted eyes, silent lips and hurried steps.
Such an area is susceptible to criminal invasion. Though it is not inevitable, it is more likely that here, rather than in places where people are confident they can regulate behaviour by informal controls [such as talking to each other, and handling the situation personally, that] drugs will change hands, prostitutes will solicit, and cars will be stripped. That the drunks will be robbed by boys who do it as a lark… That muggings will occur. – Wilson & Kelling, "Broken Windows".[ciii]

The media is a major contributor to this sense of fear and distrust. Crime and violence (particularly random acts of crime between strangers) are consistently overstated in the media. The media, through this overstatement, cause an atmosphere of paranoia and distrust of strangers more generally within society.[civ] TV stations hire crime reporters who report regardless of the statistical frequency or significance of a crime; a practice that is condemned by Government and Independent Reports alike.[cv] It is these sorts of practices that make the *Australian Federal Police Association* accuse the media of displaying "the worst excesses of humanity" to the public on a daily basis.[cvi] The *AFP* suggest that this substantiates the public's fear of strangers in the community, even when that fear is disproportionate to crime rates.[cvii] Overseas, the majority of British people think crime is continually rising, even though it has been steadily falling since 1995.[cviii] In America, coverage of crime in one state increased by 600%, where crimes committed actually fell by 20% in the same space of time.[cix] We overstate the problem, perpetuate the fear, and then create a larger problem of social isolation, caused by the fear itself - leading to strangers becoming dangerous. We then warn our children of "Stranger Danger" – making the situation worse.

By focusing attention on statistically insignificant events, we actually *increase* their significance and their affect on society. The "threats" that we fear are often overstated, exaggerated and fringed with the undertones of discrimination and racism. There is evidence to suggest that the more "segregation" and "homogenization" occurs in society, the more small differences between us, even in physical appearance can become "threatening".[cx] Such threatening appearances are overburdened in the news media, in which the race of the perpetrator, often for the innocent reason of "identification", is conveyed with the story. How many times have we heard the alleged robber described as "a man of middle eastern appearance", "Mediterranean appearance", "Sudanese men", "African" in appearance, "Indian appearance", "Caucasian in appearance".[cxi]

The truth is that a general fear of strangers is equivalent to a fear of 'people different to me', people 'different to my family', and thus it has the underpinnings of potential discrimination. This is especially true when attitudes taught to our youth such as "stranger danger" are maintained through adult life. Considering that most strangers in modern cities *do not talk to each other* on public transport, we can assume that this is indeed the case.

Our intolerance of strangers and our approach to silence may be contributing to this sense of alienation within society. The isolated -disturbed by their own lack of social

connection- may act out in violence. In consequence our "silence" itself may be a catalyst for criminal activity rather than prevention, as "Stranger Danger" programs have us believe.

On the flip side, communication and a sense of community can help prevent crime, as well as provide a general sense of communal harmony that increases personal happiness. The reasons for treating strangers with hostile indifference are minimal and potentially dangerous; the reasons for treating strangers with civility and respect are abundant.

Chapter 7: Cutting Ourselves Off, Avoiding People &

The Age of Instant Gratification

Alarmingly, despite the above evidence of the dangers of social isolation, people are increasingly *embracing and causing* lives of loneliness and alienation. "Work-from-home" has become a common catch cry for the ever-busy parent who wishes to reduce their commute. This form of telecommuting whilst beneficial in an economic sense, is deeply costly from a social psychological standpoint. By limiting and reducing our physical proximity to new colleagues, we limit our ability to befriend them and form long-term meaningful relationships. By limiting ourselves to our houses, we limit all accidental forms of communication such as 'bumping into' a stranger, or any contact with strangers altogether. This limits and confines our relationships to people we know. Or, if we go online to meet people, to groups and people whom often share our similar interests and outlooks. In fact, one of the most worrying dilemmas of modern life is that, with the internet, someone can live their entire life from their bedroom without meeting anyone at all.

The core question is: are we meant to be passive receptors of existence? Or rather, are we made to play an active role in life's affairs? It is contestable that our flexi-time work-from-home lifestyle that many of us seek is just turning us all into social pariahs. When we confine ourselves to our homes, and indulge in life from afar, we risk losing much of that everyday social interaction that is so *necessary* as a basis for personal health.
Often entertainment and the media sustain and prolong our denial in such isolated environments. The media and other forms of entertainment (such as comedy shows and even books) can play on our psychological cravings for excitement, drama, conflict, resolutions and other basic instinctual desires that *we would otherwise gain* from "real world" experiences. Instead of taking risks in real life, we watch others take 'life or death risks' on television, breathe a sigh of relief that it's not us and turn over and fall asleep with nothing accomplished.

Entertainment traps us into complacency by tapping into our psychological need for "rewards". These rewards have received much scholarship in recent years, and through testing, have been proven to be highly addictive.[cxii] Yes, as addictive as drugs.[cxiii] Psychologist Mark Griffiths summarises that "all addictions" are "essentially about *constant* rewards and reinforcements".[cxiv] We are willing to put a certain amount of effort into something to receive a certain level of reward. If

something is *too difficult* and the reward is too hard to gain, we will give up. On the other hand: if the difficulty of gaining the reward is *perfectly balanced* with the *timing* of receiving the reward, we will keep going back. We will become addicted. It is a cycle of work, reward and reinforcement that gets us hooked.

Take computer games, where intangible rewards are given in the form of *mere images* of trophies, stars or access to new content or a high 'score' to brag about. Computer games are often balanced to *time* these rewards so as not to make the game 'too difficult' for you to lose interest, but instead reward you at just the right level and thereby trigger addiction. In effect: hard enough to make the reward *worth fighting for*, *but not too hard that you quit in frustration*.

Surprisingly, TV shows and books work in exactly the same manner. The amount of work you put in -the amount of time you spend watching or reading- must be perfectly balanced with the *timing* of attaining the rewards you get from doing so. These rewards come in the form of denouements or big revelatory moments, compelling cliff hangers, fresh and exciting dramatic moments, comedic moments or educational experiences. We dedicate time to detective thrillers to find out 'who dun it' and feel validated when the murderer is particularly unlikely. We enjoy TV drama for the emotional excitement of marital breakdowns and adulterous affairs, with no risk to ourselves in the process. In each case these rewards are *perfectly timed* so as not to lose our interest but to keep us right there in the heat of the moment. Intuitively we understand this process and recognise that shows without these 'rewards' make us bored. These are the shows with no 'exciting' moments or shows that take too long 'to get to the point'. What we mean when we say 'get to the point' is 'get to my reward already'. On the other hand, we intuitively know that the most thrilling and versatile shows are successful because they *constantly* reward us as we keep watching them. They provide *consistent, reliable* entertainment every time.

Each of us has unique 'rewards' we respond to. Some of us enjoy comedy or laughter, while others enjoy suspense or thrills. Regardless of our personal preferences, we each succumb to our choice of poison. In every case these 'rewards' entice us to keep coming back for more. We therefore become addicted at a subconscious level, and this is why we enjoy our favourite TV show almost compulsively. Missing it for even one week triggers psychological withdrawal symptoms. Indeed, this is one of the major signs of a behavioural addiction: a significant indication that we are feeling compelled to 'get our fix'.[cxv]

What's more, these entertainments -when addictive- can affect us physiologically. Much like drugs and alcohol, addictions to TV and entertainment can impact our "epinephrine, dopamine and serotonin levels".[cxvi] Those are respectively our: fight-or-flight adrenalin hormone, our 'reward' hormone (the one triggered by addictive drugs) and our 'happiness' hormone. In effect, some of our base hormonal gratifications are met by entertainment. It is these hormonal changes that have tangible effects on our emotional well-being. It is these tangible effects *on the brain* that make entertainment so 'rewarding'.

But what is at risk in this instant gratification?
Importantly, these activities satiate our *base* impulses but do nothing for our *grander* impulses of life fulfilment, personal achievement or social development. In excess,

entertainment can destroy a person's life. And it is the very character of entertainment –addictive, and instantly gratifying- that can lead to personal destruction.

A life solely devoted to entertainment is a life of mere consumerism. Intrinsically we understand that a person who *solely consumes* can contribute nothing of value to the world – but more importantly – leaves no legacy behind of their life, their dreams, their aspirations or personality. Consumers are forgotten; producers reign supreme. *It is this loss that we now risk.* It is the untold millions who are quelled into inaction by addictive forms of entertainment. It is the untold hours lost to social media, the Internet and digital entertainment. It is the untold stories of loneliness, alienation and isolation, quelled by forms of entertainment that substitute in our lives in place of real human contact.

In 2013 there was a Spanish study of "Internet Use Disorder".[cxvii] The disorder consists of "behavioural non-essential" Internet activities (leisure, pleasure or recreational activities) causing "mass disturbances in the subject's life". The paper suggests that Internet addiction, like other addictions, is characterized by withdrawal symptoms, mood changes and obsessive-compulsive behaviour. Problematic users were those spending (on average) *2.25 hours* online per day and *15-25 hours* online per week. If we regard our own use of Internet technologies: the use of social media, email, news, online games, TV and movies used throughout the day on our laptops, computers and mobile devices. It's hard to admit, but most of us have a problem here.

Importantly, these forms of media *can* be used for the grander purposes of self-fulfilment, human achievement, creativity, innovation and social connection. However, by their very nature, online videos concerning the meaning of life are not as *instantly* rewarding as a comedy show that 'rewards' you every 3 sentences with another laugh. As discussed above, the comedy show is triggering addictive behavioural patterns with reinforcements and rewards; the one-hour lecture is not.

Many of us have curbed our minds away from these longer, more developed, more complicated, knowledgeable and time-consuming forms of media. In doing so, we have moved away from unique forms of self-development, innovation and achievement in our spare time, to replace them with passive forms of consumerism. We have substituted lives of real emotional, physical and social connection, with lives of passive, insubstantial and artificial emotion. We live by proxy, yet our damaged emotions remain our own.

Chapter 8: Exclusionary Cultural Practices

Social isolation is likewise buoyed on the exclusionary practices of orthodox cultural institutions that openly preference insiders over outsider groups. Many traditionalist cultures, when motivated by an "us" vs. "them" paradigm, construct cultural practices that limit insider-outsider interaction. Insiders –people who are born or raised within a culture- are referred to as being 'knowledgeable' or 'informed', whereas outsiders are stigmatised as being 'ignorant'. This creates a system of competition, where the outsider's ignorance is viewed as an existential threat to a culture's continued existence.[cxviii] If outsider groups gain too much influence, it is argued, a culture may assimilate into society and cease to exist. By limiting interactions with outsiders, the culture can avoid this and retain homogeneity even within a multicultural society. Treating outsiders differently to your own people, in terms of preferential treatment for insider groups, is an obvious form of prejudice. However, cultural institutions escape criticism by institutionalising these practices, mandating them as part of the culture itself, or criticising outsider protests as ignorant.

The best example of cultural re-entrenchment is the ban of intermarriage with outsider groups. Preferential treatment in marriage is a cultural re-entrenchment tool that ensures that a culture continues over time, by ensuring that all children born into a culture are raised to understand that culture's core doctrine. This is the line of argument proponents use to justify the practice, claiming that cultural assimilation leads to "white washing". Bans on intermarriage are usually *not* practiced by the whole culture, but by a small minority. This sub-culture, often orthodox or purist in nature, tend to believe that cultural decline is the worst aspect of a globalist, secularised world.

Never is this viewpoint more prevalent than in fringe religious institutions. In Orthodox Judaism, for example, many obey a strict observance of the Torah's declaration concerning the "seven nations" of Canaan; "You [the Jewish people] shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughter to his son, and you shall not take his daughter for your son".[cxix] Orthodox commentators interpret this sentence as applying to all non-Jewish people, imposing a strict ban on *all* intermarriage with outsider groups.[cxx] (There is an exception for converts.) As Orthodox Rabbi Elan Adler says "why wouldn't I officiate at a marriage for an interfaith couple? … The best answer I can give is what I am. I am a Rabbi, and my Torah says I can't."[cxxi]

The common justification for this ban is that intermarriage "weakens the stability of the Jewish religion", and poses an existential "threat" to the continuation of the religion down the ages.[cxxii] Indeed the biblical verse concludes "[do not intermarry with them] For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods".[cxxiii] In this vein, those who intermarry are often said to be "lost" to the religion, and children of intermarried couples who don't become Jewish are also deemed "lost".[cxxiv] Putting aside the patriarchal claims of ownership over a human being who has free will to make up their own mind about their own religion – the framing of this argument is largely problematic because it begins with the premise that Judaism is right and all other forms of existence are somehow lesser. Orthodox discussion on intermarriage tends to hinge on the question "why [doesn't] the non-Jew in the … couple… convert?"[cxxv] The hypocrisy of this question is the demand of assimilation of outsiders into Judaism, from a group of Orthodox commentators who fear their own assimilation into wider society. Nor is credence given to the idea that a fulfilling life can be led without Judaism, in another religion, or simply without religion at all.

It is important to note here that only a ***minority*** of the Jewish community holds this view. In fact, the majority of Jewish people in America think a ban on intermarriage is racist.[cxxvi] The majority of Jews *are* in fact intermarried, and the trend has been increasingly so over time.[cxxvii] Hence this kind of traditionalist thinking is both unpopular and losing ground in terms of swaying hearts and minds.

A more inclusive, secularized version of marriage should be encouraged where pragmatic to do so. Indeed the fundamental core of several religions is a love of strangers. In the Jewish tradition itself there is a practice on Passover of welcoming strangers into your home. The Bible reads, "You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you … were strangers in the land of Egypt."[cxxviii] Hospitality to strangers is seen as a mitzvah, a good deed, not only because of the historical significance, but also because of the foundational principle laid down by the story of Abraham. In the story of Abraham, Abraham's hospitality to strangers is rewarded by the miracle birth of a baby boy.[cxxix] Hence God directly condones the practice. Here an Orthodox Rabbi would advise you to "Welcome strangers into your home, but do not marry them!" However, this is an obvious contradiction, for clearly the ultimate 'love of strangers' is simply to love and marry a stranger. Indeed in a pluralistic society intermarriage evidences "weak… social barriers" between groups, implying a spirit of harmony, dialogue and connection.[cxxx] This type of social harmony is worthy of celebration, not condemnation.

Love, above anything else, is something that breaks down boundaries and establishes ties between competing groups. Hence allowing people to love and be loved by whomever they want is a foundational principle for any inclusive, multicultural and progressive society. Therefore, instead of adding extra barriers between people, and encouraging forms of isolation and exclusion, we should be encouraging a more diverse and intermingling population. In this way we can let people decide for themselves whom they want to marry, and let marriage be a tool to bring people closer together, instead of a tool to drive people further apart.

Our Current Predicament:

It has become increasingly easier over the last few decades to extricate ourselves from environments where people are different to us. And instead - enter into environments where people are largely the same.

Throughout this book I've looked at the trends and forces behind this push towards similarity and sameness, and away from diversity and intermingling communal life. Whether it be our instantly-gratifying technology, which makes staying home that much more 'rewarding' than going out and meeting new people. Or how we treat strangers as "dangers", to be avoided with a hostile indifference and a glare on a busy train ride home. Or perhaps our cultures that can sometimes forcibly mandate our separation: as is the practice with the ban on intermarriage in some Orthodox traditions.

All of these forces push us each towards a narrowing of the human experience, that is, a lack of a chance of meeting other human beings. Within our own isolated, stratified groups and enclaves, we continue talking to those we already know, and those who share our similar tastes, interests and often, outlook in life. Here, we are never challenged, never awed or amazed by someone fundamentally different to ourselves, nor are we intrigued by competing beliefs, perspectives and opinions that others may have. Ultimately, we risk becoming closed-minded in these environments, viewing ourselves as superior to 'outsider' groups or only liking people who are 'like us'.

Worse than this however, is the risk that we now face of losing our empathy for each other. Our empathy is strongest when we have close social ties to those around us, as evidenced by the idea of an 'expanding circle' of empathy, mentioned earlier in this book. Yet, in the way we currently live our lives, detached and estranged from those around us, the social ties in our communities are continuously weakening. As too is the empathy we feel for our fellow human being walking down the street. The more we push each other apart, the less we view each other as actual human beings at all. The man on the train becomes an 'obstacle' to get through to get to the door. The woman with the pram on the street becomes an unnecessary annoyance on the morning trip to work. Worse, we begin to assign each stranger a simplistic category. The man becomes 'Oh, another boring accountant', and so on, giving a grossly simplistic generalization of the man's entire existence in a single sentence.

It is important to pause here and contemplate the ramifications of our actions. In isolation these events seem harmless encounters, but it is their pattern across the entire population that makes them a dire risk. As long as we continue fracturing our social bonds, we continue breaking down the informal social structures that help build empathy for each other. Without empathy, we risk descent into both mental illness and crime, where people disregard each other to such an extent that they feel no qualm in injuring each other.

Yet none of these risks need eventuate, if we take the proper steps to rebuild the classic 'community' social structures that have, for so long, kept these risks at bay. By harnessing social bonds, we can pull people back from the edge. Mental illness (best fostered in isolation) can become less of a concern, as people begin to establish firm social support structures, which need not adhere to the traditional boundaries that make isolation a real possibility in modern city life. Our workplaces, dictated as the halls of the 'similar career aspirant', can become places of intermingling jobs and professions, where everyone you meet challenges you to think differently and outside your specialty.

Innovation, creativity, and ingenuity: all are sparked in these intermingling collaborative hubs, where the best of each profession shines a light on the profession next door. New ideas, unfathomable in an isolated corporate monolith, become possible when the minds of diverse industries combine in the same complex. Beyond this however, significant empathy is developed between industry groups in shared spaces. Instead of the separatist culture of job titles and labels, the corporation becomes an inclusive term, helping to bring people together into the same space for collaboration. These collaborative spaces already exist, but deserve a greater and more permanent fixture in our social structures.

In each and every one of the areas discussed above, our challenges of isolation, separatism and division can be solved by literally bringing people together. Physical proximity, as stated throughout this book, is one of the best ways to bring people of diverse backgrounds into the same place, in such a way as to make them get along. Whether it be recreation centers such as restaurants: that have the power to create communal meals and events, and hold communal tables (where strangers are actively encouraged to meet). Or workplaces, as discussed above, where shared and collaborative spaces can encourage intermingling corporate structures and ingenuity: two distinct, but equally rewarding outcomes. Finally, in our Universities and Schools students need not be separated by religion, colour or creed, but rather should be encouraged to meet a diverse range of students and to interact and learn from one another. Each of these institutions can provide the physical proximity necessary to break down our social boundaries and restore our social bonds. Individually, they can make small changes, which across the whole of society can create a mountain of change.

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