

As I let loose this book, I would like to leave you with the parting thoughts that empathy ... IS A WORD

It is easy to forget that empathy, first and foremost, is a word. And because it is a word, unless we are upfront about our own definitions, chances are good that we will be unable to have a constructive conversation about it. To minimize misunderstandings, I have defined empathy in the book as an explanatory principle for our potential to experience an event, where we feel as if we are embodying or understanding the experience of an other, and its related meanings from the context and vantage point of that other.

... IS RELATIONAL

Realizing empathy requires that we go beyond our own knowledge, world view, or understanding of reality, in order to learn something new, to synthesize a new world view, or a new understanding of reality. By definition, this requires a relationship to an other. Whether this other is another human being, a piece of wood, a character in a story, or even a part of our own body, the principles are the same. This is not to anthropomorphize or to claim that non-human beings have minds like our own, but to simply say that how we embody, understand, and ultimately connect with an other is not limited by their physical, biological, or neurological makeup, but rather how we perceive of and relate to them.

... IS SPECIFIC TO THE MOMENT

Whether or not we can, will, or even wish to realize our empathy in relation to an other depends on a number of interrelated and qualitative conditions that can change from moment to moment. For each and every one of us, there will always be moments when we will be unable to realize our empathy in relation to a certain other in a certain space through a certain language. This does not make us wholly lacking in empathy. It simply means that empathy isn't always provoked as an involuntary reflex, and that sometimes steps need to be taken before it can be realized.

... MAKES YOU VULNERABLE

Realizing empathy not only requires that we be a vessel open enough to be able to fill ourselves with the other, but also to then empty ourselves back out in as honest and sincere a manner as possible. This is an experience that requires us to suspend our desire for certainty, thus making us highly vulnerable throughout the process.

... IS COMPLEX

As we're trying to realize our empathy in relation to one other, we may be recursively and simultaneously trying to realize our empathy in relation to ourselves or yet another other. In order to realize our empathy on a larger scale, we may have to realize our empathy on a smaller scale. When, how, and in relation to which other we have realized our empathy in the past will affect whether, how, and why we realize our empathy in relation to another other in the future. Realizing empathy is a non-linear, distributed, highly interrelated, and fractal process.

... DEVELOPS KNOWLEDGE

Every time we realize our empathy in relation to an other, we develop our knowledge and sensitivity in relation to that other. Therefore, the more experience we have realizing our empathy in relation to a variety of others in a variety of contexts, the more knowledge and sensitivity we will develop in general. In fact, this process of coming to appreciate more and more of the nuances, complexities, and elaborations of others we once assumed to know can be thought of as the very definition of maturation.

... IS CREATIVE

To realize our empathy in relation to an other requires that we make new, meaningful, and coherent relationships where there previously were none. Whether the relationship is between one's own perspective and that of an other's, between one's understanding of an other's reality and the reality as embodied by that other, between the meaning one makes by merely perceiving the other and the meaning that can only be made after considering the context of that other, or simply between the self and other, the principles are the same. This process is also known as making a hisociation—in contrast to making an association—and forms the basis of what we call creativity.

... BLURS BOUNDARIES

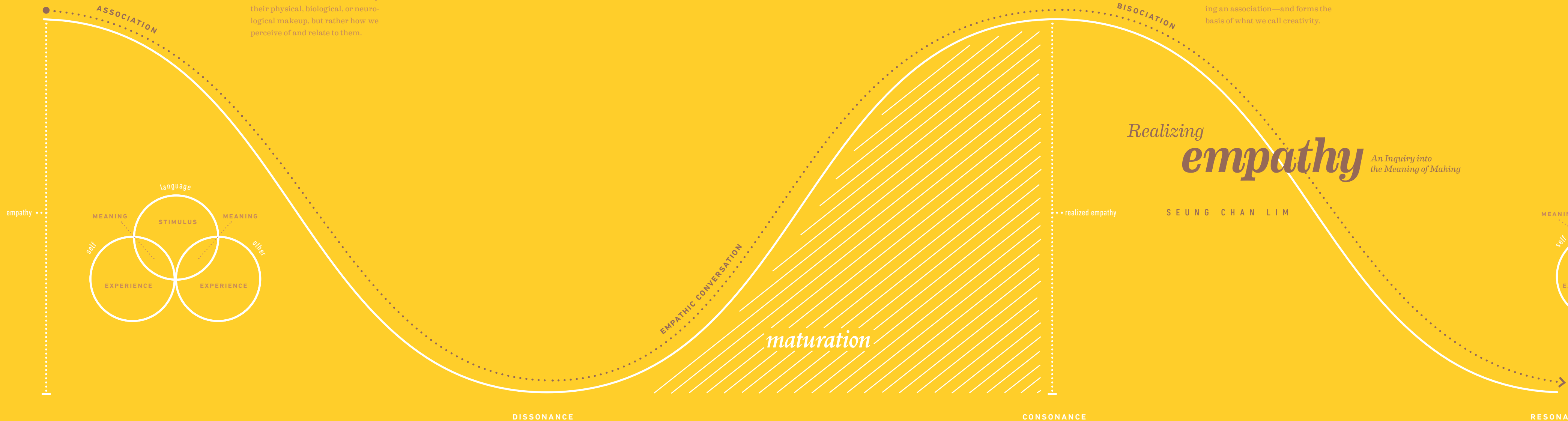
When empathy is realized, the boundary between self and other is blurred. For this reason, it's less useful to have static boundaries between self and other when talking about empathy. In the book, I define an other as anyone or anything that we are not fully aware of, cannot understand, or meaningfully connect to at any given moment. At times, even our own thoughts can be considered an other, because we cannot understand or meaningfully connect to them.

... DOES NOT DICTATE BEHAVIOR

Realized empathy does not have a consistent and linear correlation to kind, nice, or altruistic behavior. Further, once we are able to empathize with the deeper reason behind an other's seemingly unkind behavior, more often than not we realize that it is a product of a misunderstanding. This makes it highly problematic to discuss an other's empathy based on mere observations of their behavior.

... IS SUBJECTIVE

When empathy is realized, we feel as if we are embodying or understanding an other. The emphasis being on the subjective experience of *as if*. This means that we cannot objectively claim that we have empathized with an other unless there is a way to verify that claim. Further, the method you choose to verify the claim will always be limited in some way with varying margins of error and possibilities for misunderstanding. Therefore, there can never be a 100% guarantee. But that kind of precision and accuracy isn't even the goal of realizing one's empathy. This is not to say that precision and accuracy are not important. It is to simply say that humility is a virtue when it comes to realizing our empathy, and that realizing empathy is best framed as an ongoing pursuit.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seung Chan (a.k.a. Slim) is a designer, researcher, speaker, and author actively researching the role and value of empathy in everything from creativity, design, innovation, learning, education, to general relationships, and human dignity. After spending nine years in the domain of human-centered design and pervasive computing systems research, he felt the need to find a new way of looking at his practice. To satisfy this thirst, he spent four years studying both visual and performing arts, during which he developed a way of looking at the creative process of "making something" as being analogous to engaging in an empathic conversation with another person.