

## **Newsletter for Sep 26, 2026 : Empathy Under Fire**

### **Today in History:**

**1962:** Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published, and it became one of the most-influential books in the modern environmental movement.

### **I Still Need Your Help**

This week marks the real start of election season: The State of Vermont is mailing out ballots to every registered voter! That means that some of you will be voting as early as this week! Some people, myself among them, will wait to vote at the polls on November 3. I like the experience of gathering with my fellow citizens to share the experience at the polls by voting in person, and seeing others doing the same: exercising our right to have a voice in selecting those who will represent us.

In the coming weeks, voters – that means you! – still have the opportunity to gather information about candidates, share that information with others, and keep interest alive. Make sure that your friends and neighbors are voting – early if possible – and participating in the democratic process. It's too important, especially this year, for anyone to sit this one out.

### **Speaking of Opportunities...**

There are a few upcoming events that you may want to attend. A couple of them will be on CAT-TV live, or available on streaming after the fact. Invite your friends to join you in person, or to view them live or streaming on CAT-TV, then talk about what you see and hear. Use that to help you decide who to vote for, up and down the ticket. I hope you'll be voting for me, and for Democrats in general, but the important thing is that you stay informed, and especially that you vote!

Here are some upcoming events you may want to attend:

**Wednesday September 30:** The Bright Futures Candidates Forum will be held at the Bennington Free Library from 6:00-7:30PM and also on CAT-TV. Bennington area candidates for the state legislature will address issues and answer questions related to child care, early childhood education and other topics.

**Saturday October 3:** I'll be holding a Meet & Greet at Hilltop Market on Route 7 in Pownal from 1:00–3:00PM. I'll be joined by Lon McClintock who is running for re-election as Probate Judge. You'll have the opportunity to talk to both of us, ask questions and give your input.

**Thursday October 8:** Candidates Forum at the Bennington Fire Station 3rd floor All-purpose room from 6:00–7:30PM and also on CAT-TV. Area candidates for the State House of Representatives will discuss issues and answer questions on a range of topics.

**Saturday October 10:** I'll be holding a Meet & Greet at Haberdasher Wine and Provisions on Main Street in Bennington from 4:00–6:00PM. Haberdasher will also be having a wine tasting and there will be assorted cheeses and other treats available. This will be a good opportunity to get some one-on-one time with me to make sure I hear your questions and concerns!

### **Empathy Gets a Bad Rap**

*Quick Summary: I believe empathy is one of the greatest strengths of our community—not a weakness. In Bennington, we see that strength every day in the people and organizations that step up to help neighbors through hardship, support children and seniors, and give people a hand when they need it. But nonprofits and individuals can't do it all; government also has a responsibility to protect the health and safety of our citizens and to act collectively when individual efforts aren't enough. As your representative, I'll work to build on that spirit of caring, strengthen our community, and make sure government is there when Vermonters need a helping hand.*

I have to confess that empathy – the capacity to understand the feelings of others – has long been one of the driving factors in my life. I've always considered it a positive force, one that drives us to acts of kindness and caring. According to an increasing number of “thinkers” on the political right however, that caring – the empathy that leads to it, and the actions that stem from it – is destroying Western Civilization.

Elon Musk, that intellectual philosopher and all-around “genius,” has stated that empathy is humanity's greatest weakness. When I read that, I assumed that he'd just been taking ketamine again and that it was just a one-off statement from

someone who's been spouting nonsense – along with demonstrating some pretty crazy behaviors – for quite some time. As it turns out, he's not alone in this belief.

A recent article in [The Atlantic](#) reviews one of many recent books on the subject of *empathy*, and the supposedly disastrous consequences of acting on it. Those consequences – and I wish I were kidding here – include “the collective suicide of the West.” You read that right: empathy will result in nothing less than the death of Western Civilization!

### **Who Actually Believes This?**

Proponents of “empathy will destroy us” include a marketing professor from Canada (of all places! I thought Canadians were *nice*!), and a Roman Catholic *bishop*! Apparently “love thy neighbor” and “do unto others” has been superseded by “let people solve their own problems or suffer the consequences.” “Love” has been redefined as “indifference” and “turn the other cheek” as “turn a blind eye” lest you be tempted to actually help someone.

I have long heard conservatives argue that social-welfare programs remove any incentive for people in need to help themselves. That position has apparently now evolved into helping those in need will, as one author states it, “undermine the foundations of the West.”

I feel compelled to note that it's not a challenge to identify examples of charity gone awry. It's easy to cherry-pick, especially when citing anecdotal evidence, only those stories that support your thesis. It's also easy to overstate the consequences of those occasional failures. Unfortunately, none of that stops otherwise intelligent people from believing what they want to believe.

### **And Why do They Believe it?**

The author of the article in *The Atlantic* (and I encourage you to read it) states that the anti-empathy movement allows conservatives to assuage their conscience – their feelings of guilt at allowing their fellow human beings to suffer – by allowing them to believe that their lack of action stems not from cruelty or indifference, but from a desire to “save our culture” from the (supposedly) disastrous consequences of helping those in need.

I'm not convinced that this is so much an emotional belief as it is another tool to ignore evidence and centuries of human growth. If it were just this single example, I might believe that conservatives who are opposed to social-welfare programs really do have the best interests of the poor and disadvantaged at heart, and that their beliefs – and the actions that might result from them – are really for everyone's good.

Viewed in their totality, conservative beliefs, which include climate change denial, opposition to any form of social-welfare, tax “relief” for the wealthy, removing people from health insurance, eliminating programs addressing hunger, and so many others, it's hard to see this as anything other than looking out for themselves. If you don't care that the planet is in danger – and can deny to others (and maybe to yourself) the data that supports the reality of global warming – it seems that denying *any* assistance to those truly in need is just a small additional step. It's hard to see the author of a book claiming that empathy is “suicidal” as trying to make believers feel better about themselves. It looks rather more like an attempt to spread a gospel of cruelty and indifference, while disguising it as saving Western Civilization.

### **Where I Stand on This**

On the morning of Saturday, September 19th, I participated in the Walloomsac Walk Tree of Gratitude celebration, giving the opening address and reading (along with Marshall Hudson Knapp) the names and mission statements of the 51 local organizations being honored for their contributions to the Bennington community. My address should have left no confusion about where I stand.

In part I praised the honorees for their dedicated service to the community with their work supporting the very young, the old, and everyone in between, helping people to transition to a better version of themselves and guiding and supporting them through temporary setbacks and life's inevitable challenges. I noted that sometimes we can pick ourselves up and move on and sometimes life's challenges can overwhelm us. Each of the organizations honored on that day have demonstrated that their shared strength and caring, their leadership, is at the heart of our community. It's our secret strength. It's part of what makes Bennington work.

I truly believe that, without that caring and sharing, without the helping hand that's always there when there is a need, without a voice saying "I am here, I can help" some of us would not make it. We *should* feel empathy when we see someone in need. We *should* feel some guilt when we see our own failure to respond to that need. That's part of what makes us human and, far from being a threat to our civilization, it's part of the strength we share as a culture, and as a country.

While I am grateful to these non-profit organizations (and many others) for the help that they provide, I believe that it is incumbent upon us to offer support and assistance when needed. That assistance should happen at a personal level, if we are able. But ensuring the health and safety of our citizens is also a primary function of government. If that is *not* included in your definition of what government should do – to act collectively when individual action is insufficient – I have to ask seriously what government is for.

### **One More Thing...**

If you've read my recent newsletters, you know I have said that I can't change anything in Montpelier on my own. It will be a big help to have other, like-minded people serving with me in the legislature. So this is a plug for my fellow candidate for Bennington-5, Mike Nigro. Mike is a good guy who will support you in the legislature and work with me to bring about meaningful change. Please, when you vote for me, vote for Mike, too!