Art as an instrument to develop empathy

In a previous article called Art as an educational tool in medicine, we discussed the idea of introducing art as a teaching resource in healthcare professional training based on the power of art’s symbolic language to reflect human emotions.1

In this article, we will analyze one of the main components of the world of indescribability: the empathic attitude. Empathy is the sublime human capability of experiencing another person’s feelings “firsthand” and of making them patent even in the relationship with that other person, whether they are pleasant (joy, relief, etc.) or unpleasant (sadness, pain, etc.).2,3 When one’s experience is related to another person’s suffering, empathy is referred to as compassion. In addition, compassion should not be confused with mercy although both terms refer to experiencing another person’s suffering, compassion does it from an equal emotional stance, while mercy is indicative of an alleged superiority. Empathy is also different from sympathy, which produces an emotional contagion so that a person who feels sympathy is not capable of distinguishing between his/her own emotions and those of others, therefore losing objectivity. Empathy should also be differentiated from a kind manner (courtesy) and from the sorrow caused by another person’s misfortune (pity), since these two do not imply sharing another person’s feelings.4 Practicing empathy requires the arrangement of a series of conditions: on the one side, effort and open-mindedness to recognize the other person as an emotion bearer; on the other side, courage and patience to temporarily experience such emotions oneself, in order to understand them, since the end goal of empathy is to comprehend another person’s experiences. For this reason, following an emotional communion, empathy requires to “put some distance” from the other person to make an objective assessment of the situation and take the correct decisions and actions. An empathic experience is therefore translated into emotional support, which should be transient.2-4

As a result, although all human beings have an innate capacity to feel empathy, it may be enhanced through its practice and better understanding by means of reading (literature), contemplating (painting, sculpture, dancing, filming) and/or listening (music) to the masterpieces of universal art. Thanks to their great talent, authors have been able to instill a strong symbolic effectiveness into their pieces of art so much so that getting to know this type of material is transformational and turns the person who comes into contact with them into a more sensitive and empathic being.5-10

Below are some examples found in the universal literature:

James Joyce’s Ulysses includes several paragraphs describing the great empathic capability of its main character (Leopold Bloom), for example, when Bloom remembers Mrs. Purefoy, who has just given birth, and feels the same labour pains: Poor Mrs. Purefoy! Three days imagine groaning on a bed!… Child’s head too big: forceps.

During an empathic experience, the situation encountered by the other finds a resonance in the inner world of the observer, and such connection is made possible thanks to the “shuttle to the past” that is emotional memory. The thing is that only what is felt can be recognized, and once identified, it means that it has been experienced. This type of memory is masterly described by Marcel Proust in Swann’s Way:

... But at the very instant when the mouthful of tea mixed with cake crumbs touched my palate, I quivered, attentive to the extraordinary thing that was happening inside me. A delicious pleasure had invaded me, isolated me, without my having any notion as to its cause. It had immediately rendered the vicissitudes of life unimportant to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory, acting in the same way that love acts... Where could it have come to me from –this powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected to the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it went infinitely far beyond it, could not be of the same nature...

In his novel The Magic Mountain, Thomas Mann describes the feeling of suppression of time and space coordinates that surrounds a person who goes through an empathic experience:

... Quite suddenly he found himself in the far distant past, transported to a scene which had come back to him in a dream some nights before, summoned by certain impressions of the last few days. But so strongly, so resistlessly, to the annihilation of time and space, was he rapt back into the past, one might have said it was a lifeless body lying here on the bench by the waterside, while the actual Hans Castorp moved in that far-away time and place...

Empathy benefits both the recipient and giver. It allows the former to be better understood and the latter to be more understanding of the other person’s experience. Likewise, a person
who practices empathy gets to live “many lives” and progressively acquires a vast wealth of life experience and wisdom, far beyond what he/she might have achieved within the narrow confines of his/her ego.2,3

We thereby conclude that introducing art as an educational tool is highly valuable for developing a better empathic capability among healthcare professionals.

Carlos G. Musso, M.D., and Paula A. Enz, M.D.
School of Medicine, Instituto Universitario del Hospital Italiano de Buenos Aires. Argentina.

REFERENCES