

The Art of Asking Everything

Jamil Zaki: Tuning Your Empathy Fork

Amanda 00:34

This is The Art of Asking Everything podcast, I am Amanda Palmer.

This week's guest is Jamil Zaki, starring in an episode that we are calling Tuning Your Empathy Fork. There are some people that you meet on this bizarre planet who just resonate immediately. And I met Jamil in such a weird way, I was at a strange, fancy dinner for some kind of charity or organization or another, I don't even remember, at SXSW, this would have been March of 2019. And we spied each other across the room, and he was like, Amanda Palmer, I think I've seen your TED talk or read your book, you're the one who talks about asking, and empathy, and compassion! And I was like, yeah! Who are you?! And he looked at me, and he was like, I'm Jamil Zaki, and I'm gonna be your friend, or something like that.

It turns out that Jamil has written a book called The War For Kindness. And he's not just a fan of empathy and compassion and that sort of thing, he actually studies it, and lives and breathes it, at Stanford University. He's a professor of psychology there, and he's the director of the Stanford Social Neuroscience Laboratory. It's his job to figure out why people are or aren't nice to each other! He's got a TED talk called Building Empathy: How To Hack Empathy and Get Others To Care More, and when I met him, I was just starting in on this podcast, and it turns out Jamil was my very first podcast interview, and, weirdly, one of the only ones that I've done over the phone, but it was still wonderful. And when I talked to him, I was just on the precipice of putting out a poem, called Empathy Is Nothing, about my experience of writing about the Boston marathon bomber, and getting yelled at, and I was scared, and Jamil sort of became my magic feather going into that experience.

Our conversation was so good. Please welcome to The Art of Asking Everything, empathy expert Jamil Zaki.

Amanda 03:05

So, one of the most striking things that I found about your book, and really you open up with it at the beginning, is that empathy, it's like a muscle that you can exercise. And like so many other things in life, what you pay attention to, and give time and energy, and what you nurture, is what will grow. And it's so nice, like so many other things again in our world right now, from sleep to addiction to relationships, we now have hard science to support what we've always kind of intuited. Or at least what we may have intuited.

What can you tell people about what your research, and what science, have now told you about our capacity for change and growth, when it comes to how empathetic and kind we can be to other people?

Jamil 04:01

The view that we can build, or grow, or flex our empathy, is actually part of a larger movement in the sciences towards a recognition that we are more malleable than we once thought, right? I mean, it was once thought that our brains basically freeze in place, like they're frozen in amber, after we turn 18, or whenever they stop maturing. They always thought that however smart you are when you're born is how smart you'll be when you die, and there's nothing that can change that. And it was thought that there's some people who care, and some people who don't, and those people will be saints and psychopaths respectively, and that's just how it is.

All of these things have some genetic component to them, I'm not in any way saying that we can turn into absolutely anybody, irrespective of our starting point. I'm not saying that we can just go anywhere from anywhere, but evidence from across brain science and the social sciences is now pointing to the fact that we can change more than we thought. And that's certainly true of empathy.

Amanda 05:11

And that's great news all around, by the way, for all people.

Jamil 05:15

I think so. It also can be tough news, right? Because there are circumstances that can erode things that we think are unerode-able. I write in the book about the tragedy of institutionalized children in Romania, in the 60s and 70s, there was an entire generation of kids who were raised in orphanages, and they were fed, but that's basically it. They suffered what's known as relational privation, meaning that they were basically never talked to, never hugged, never held. And many of them...

Amanda 05:52

They were written off as human beings.

Jamil 05:54

Absolutely. And never given a chance to be human, insofar as humanity is connection with other people. And they became, in essence, or developed some of the traits of psychopathy, almost became psychopaths through their experience. So, the fact that we can change can be bad news if we're changing in ways that hurt us, or that cause us to hurt other people.

Amanda 06:20

I suppose the other way that all of this neuroplasticity and great news heralding that everyone can change, is probably very frightening to certain people who have just allied with a worldview, that certain things are immutable, emotionally immutable, educationally immutable, that this is

just the way it is, this is the way I've always done it. Even if these people are really intelligent, it might be discomfoting to them to know that actually, if they wanted to put the work and effort into, say, becoming more empathetic, or changing emotionally, that's there for the taking. And that in itself is just probably really distressing for people.

Jamil 06:59

Oh yeah, I mean, potential is scary. Because it's the unknown, and it's also the unknown that we control. So, in a way, hearing that you're autonomous, that you have agency, that you have a choice about who you become, requires you to take ownership over those choices, and what they produce. And that's scary.

MUSIC BREAK - You Know The Statistics

Amanda 07:32

The part in your book where you talk about fixists versus mobilists, which is actually such a great couple of terms that I'm going to carry them into my life, in whatever way I want, because I definitely am friends with some fixists and some mobilists. But can you just, from a research science standpoint, can you explain what this means? And can you tell the listeners about a couple of the studies, and these studies are fascinating, and especially how malleable people are, and how suggestible they are. Can you just talk a little bit about that?

Jamil 08:05

Of course, yeah. I mean, the term fixists and mobilists, I actually stole from, of all places, geology, because it was for a long time thought that the Earth was still, that it was fixed. And I don't mean that it didn't move in space, that was an older scientific revolution, but that the ground beneath us, relative to the Earth's core, was fixed. And people thought that forever, until about 100 years ago, and there was this guy, Alfred Wegener, this geologist, who sort of said, wait a minute, why do the Americas, especially South America and Africa, why do they look like puzzle pieces? Is there any possibility that maybe the continents move? And people laughed him out of the field. He died in ignominy, thought of as having these weird, half-baked ideas, and the people who defended the idea that the Earth was still were known as fixists. And he, and the people who agreed with him, were mobilists. People who argued that even when we can't see things moving, like the very ground underneath our feet, it can still move.

So I borrow those terms for psychology because I think that a lot of psychology's history has been pretty fixist. We've thought that our personalities, and again, our intelligence, and our character, are just there with us, kind of hardwired into our brains, and hard coded into our genes. But increasingly, there's evidence that all of those things can change. So one example is therapy. People who go to therapy become less neurotic, and that change lasts for years after they undergo therapy.

For each year of education that people experience, their IQ rises by one point, and those changes last their entire lives. These are things, again, a personality and intelligence that

people thought were fixed, but now there's ample evidence that they wobble around and that we can wobble them around on purpose.

Amanda 10:10

And if there's any takeaway to this podcast after people listen to it, I would hope that we can arm them with maybe a greater understanding of not just what change is possible in them, how much birth do we give to other people, in terms of our beliefs about them and their capacity for empathy.

There's a hilarious study that you cite in the book, about our assumptions about gender. Our assumptions about women are really, you know, they're much more warm and compassionate and empathetic than men. And men are more hardwired to be this and that way. But then there's this great study, do you know the one I'm talking about, where people are incentivized with money?

Jamil 10:57

One way of talking about mobilism is that we can change over time. Another way is that we make choices about what we want to feel in the moment. That includes empathy. I think that we turn our empathy up or down, depending on our needs, and desires, and fears, and hopes in the current moment. And a great example of that is what happens when you motivate people to feel empathy.

So as you say, there's this stereotype that men are just constitutionally incapable of empathizing, and that they'll never be able to be as good as women at it, no matter what. But [there is a set of studies where people just incentivize men in different ways](#). In one study, they pay people for getting other people right. They have folks listening to others' stories, and then see how accurate they are about their emotions, and if you don't pay people, men do worse than women. But if you do pay people, not only does everybody do better, but men in particular, close the gender gap.

Amanda 12:02

That's such a sad state of affairs, where that leads to a darker discussion about capitalism.

Jamil 12:08

Oh my god, yes, but did you see the follow up study that they also did, where they had a group of heterosexual men, and told them just that women find sensitive dudes attractive. And that also closed the gender gap. So it doesn't have to be capitalism.

Amanda 12:29

No, it's either sex or money. The two biggest carrots of all time.

MUSIC BREAK - There Will Be No Intermission

Amanda 12:43

So just thinking about what you said, someone who's paid professionally to empathize is a therapist, someone who's paid to sit in a chair, and really be present with, and pay attention to, somebody else's story, and pain, and not necessarily be sympathetic, but to be empathetic, and to be able to help someone through, and in some cases, a shrink's job may actually be best done by detaching a little bit, and not necessarily sitting and crying with the patient, as we might imagine. But you talk in the book about burnout, and compassion exhaustion. Compassion fatigue, you call it. And there are these fantastic stories in the book about the people who work in the NICU, and I think about this all the time when I think about people like EMTs, or first responders, people who are literally seeing dead bodies every day, watching children die. What have you learned in the research? What are the tools that these people have to cope with the trauma that they need to swallow and regurgitate on a day-to-day basis? How do they deal?

Jamil 13:57

Oh, gosh, I mean, sometimes not very well. I mean, not for nothing. Burnout is an epidemic, it's risen dramatically among caring professionals over the last five years. You mentioned the NICU, that I sort of visited. That's also the NICU where my first daughter lived for the early weeks of her life.

Amanda 14:19

People, by the way, who don't know what a NICU is, it is the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. It's the ICU for teeny premature babies. A rough emotional place to be that you, Jamil, were in with your daughter.

Jamil 14:31

I say in the book that if sadness were light, you could see NICUs shining from space. I mean, they're just the saddest places I've ever... it's the saddest place I've ever been, and obviously for my family was a tragic place because our daughter suffered a stroke at birth. And so we were there, just wondering if she was going to live, and what her life would look like. I'm happy to report that three and a half years later, she's thriving, but at the time, it was the hardest moment of our life, and we were surrounded by other people who were in the hardest moment of their lives. And then these caregivers, who were just empathic superheroes. I've never received empathy like that from strangers. And after getting out of the fog of our own family's struggles, I just developed this deep curiosity, how could they possibly do this every day? And I saw at that unit, a lot of people who work there just really struggling to... not struggling to care for the people there, they were so preternaturally good at that, but struggling to care for their own families, struggling to care for themselves.

A lot of answers coming out now, of research about how people can deal with emotional exhaustion, empathic exhaustion, it's not just for people who work in hospitals, by the way, but I think one big insight is that empathy is not one thing. I think you nicely separated caring for people, feeling for people, versus feeling as they do. And I think a lot of us confuse empathy with feeling other people's pain. That's one part of empathy, but it's not the only part. We can

also experience what I would call empathic concern or compassion, feeling goodwill towards others, and a desire for them to feel better without drowning in their suffering. And now, there are actually people helping train caring professionals in how to toggle or switch between types of empathy, and realize that you don't have to sacrifice yourself emotionally in order to provide deep and true care to someone else.

Amanda 16:55

Actually, if we go back to what you were saying about empathy being a muscle that you exercise, when I look back on my career, you say beautifully in the beginning of the book that coming from divorced parents was like being in an empathy gym. You were just constantly doing the push-ups and weightlifting of empathizing with your dad and your mom, these two people on opposite sides of the field, both of whom you needed to connect with for survival as a kid, for emotional survival. I was also growing up in a divorce situation. My parents split when I was really young, though, which made things weird. I was, I think 10 months old, when my mom left my dad, and I went back and forth between my parents, but I was mostly sort of just aligned in my mom's household with my stepdad and my three older siblings who came and went.

And then I got into the line of work that I did, with a diversion in my teens and college through being best friends with a therapist, which I talk about a lot, and I talk about Anthony a lot in my book. And he really schooled me in a lot of this stuff that you and I are talking about now.

When I look at my career, and the fact that from the very beginning of being a rock musician, one of the hallmarks of our style as the Dresden Dolls, and as me, as Amanda Palmer, is that we always stayed after every show. Even if it took three hours sometimes, longer than we played on stage, we would sign, and meet and greet people after the show. So on certain tour stops, you know, we would have a couple of openers, we would play for two and a half hours, but then we would sign from 11 till 1:30 in the morning. And describing those signing lines, you know, and I still do this, and to this day, whenever I can, after shows I do this, and I do events, sometimes just so I can do this, but it's like running an empathetic marathon.

And when you think about those people in the NICU, and you think about what first responders have to go through, and you think about how you're just making emotional impressions really fast, and emotional connections really fast. One of the things that I learned how to do from the time that I was 27, and the Dresden Dolls were big, and our music was affecting people, and I was writing about rape, and abuse, and darkness, and loss, and self hatred, and grief, and all these things, and people were really connecting with the music. On any given night, I might have 500 people connecting with me in person, touching me, looking in my eye, but also maybe 20 to 30 people telling me their rape story. Telling me about losing their partner. Telling about their recent suicide attempt. Telling me about their battle with self harm. Telling me about this, and you have to understand the speed at which these signing lines go. Like, really fast!

So at the end of the two and a half hour period, I've talked to all these people, but I've only been in a social space with them for a minute at a time, maybe. But I've taken all of that on, I've

listened to their story, I've literally shed tears, and then moved to the next person, who were happy and chipper, and handing me a copy of an old vinyl to sign, saying, hey, great show. And then two minutes later, going back to a rape story, and then two minutes...

Reading your book and thinking about empathy as a muscle, I think oh, my God, what that really is every night is just a heavy duty workout of the muscle of empathy.

Jamil 21:04

It's so true. I've thought a lot about that, following you on Patreon and also listening to your music, which obviously doesn't shy away from these really hard subjects, and also is so connective. A lot of your songs are in the second person, you're talking directly to the person listening, or to Judy Blume, or to your friend who just had an abortion. I feel that there's this deeply, again, connective quality to the music that you write and perform, and it invites this intimacy from your audience, and then you double down on that with these signing lines.

And I have to ask you a question that I think is probably one that maybe some of your fans share, which is, is that something that you learned? You used the word learned earlier, you said that you learned to do this. To what extent do you feel that you built that capacity? Have you been working out your whole life, or were you born like a bodybuilder?

Amanda 22:11

No! In fact, I'm like a weird success story. Because while I was deeply emotional as a teenager, I was not incredibly compassionate and I was not this beloved Snow White of Amanda Palmer is the kindest person in this high school. I was the opposite. I was the bitchy iconoclastic rabble rouser, the punk rocker who always walked down the hallway with my headphones, looking like I didn't want to talk to anybody. And yet I deeply, deeply wanted what I think in my heart of hearts everyone wants, which is I deeply yearned for connection, and wanted connection, and wanted to feel like I was part of the tribe, I wanted to feel like a comradeship with my peers and the kids in my high school, but I always felt the opposite. I felt incredibly lonely, isolated. I was bullied. And I was bullied in a way that I really brushed off because I was sort of the freaky punk kid, and I wasn't one of the popular kids, so when people yelled at me in the hall it was, hey, you're a drug addict lesbian, look at her go, look at her weird clothes, look at her weird hair. And I would stand on the other side with my middle finger in the air going, 'fuck you, you're just jealous of me, because I'm so cool, and I understand what it means to have Doc Martens and you don't.' The desire we all had to be connected with each other is so obvious. And our tools and our ability so lacking.

Jamil 23:48

One comparison would be to sex right? We all want it, but we have no fucking clue when we're 13 how to do it. So we just kind of fumble at each other, and just do our best.

MUSIC BREAK - Do It With A Rockstar

Amanda 24:16

I was very very into music, obviously, I was a songwriter when I was a teenager, and then I didn't ever really realize consciously that being a musician was going to sort of be a gateway into the professional job and gestures of an empathetic leader. The same way people saying, hey, I think I will go into this kind of oncology might not be prepared that a huge part of their job is going to be breaking the news to family that their loved ones are dying. When you look at the job description, when you're in med school, I don't know if people are necessarily going, you know, I'm really empathetic, I think I'll go into oncology because I can really talk to people about cancer and make them feel okay.

Jamil 25:11

I think it depends, in a way, on what caring profession you go into. My wife is a therapist, and a lot of my friends are therapists or social workers, and those folks are often drawn to their calling by this outsized sense that they want to care for people, or that they always have, and they just want to do it professionally. But it's interesting, because the same things that draw them to that work, the same magnetic qualities, turn into occupational hazards once they're actually on the ground, and inundated with other people's pain.

Amanda 25:48

There's a great passage in the book where you talk about these two photographers, journalistic photographers on the frontlines of capturing human pain, and how they have really different approaches to work, and how they compartmentalize. I would love for you to explain that story. But I looked at that, and their two approaches, and I was like, oh, right, I could look at my musician friends through those same lenses, and my writer friends, the friends who make art, and whether they choose approach A or approach B.

Jamil 26:19

It's a choice that we make constantly, and has a lot of repercussions. I write about these two photographers, [Ron Haviv](#) and [Ed Kashi](#). They're both photo journalists who work both on the front lines, but also in other places have deep loss and tragedies. Ed, for instance, did a whole photographic series on death and dying in America, where he photographed people in their last moments of life. Ron is just more sort of classic war photography, but the photo that I really gravitated towards of his, of a baby who had died tragically amidst this international turmoil, and they're washing this child's body for funeral purposes. Focus on that image from Ron, and one from Ed that is actually of another person who's dying, but is about 100 years old. And so they're obviously quite different images, but both have a lot of sadness in them. And I asked these photographers, what do you do? How do you deal with being around this intense emotion? And they gave me completely opposite answers. And they're both wonderful and caring, and connected people.

Ron, the person who took this photograph of the child said, you know, when I'm in those incredibly emotional moments, I have a job to do. I need to be detached in order to serve other people and their needs. In order to get their stories out, I need to not bring myself into it too

much. And he said, I'll never forget, he said, when I get back to the hotel room, I can cry. And the thing that was striking to me was that he was almost giving himself permission, which meant that he was not giving himself permission. I felt this real sternness that he had towards his own feelings. Whereas Ed sort of said, I'm like a social worker.

Amanda 28:14

Ed goes for the instant gratification.

Jamil 28:16

Yes, yes. The picture that he took is of this very elderly woman who's about to die with her husband. And they had been sleeping side by side, her in a hospital bed that they had wheeled into their West Virginia home, and him in a cot next to the bed, and they've been sleeping like that for months. And the night that she died, Ed, the photographer, slept in the cot, and the husband moved to the bed where the wife had been sleeping. So I mean, talk about intimacy. He was part of the story, he allowed himself to be part of the story. And I think that medicine, and art, and any profession, any experience where we're connecting with someone, we all kind of make that choice. Whether we make that choice, do I need to take myself out of this in order to function, in order to serve, or not?

MUSIC BREAK - Life's Such A Bitch, Isn't It

Amanda 29:19

This is going to be a beautiful transition to talking about art. What an almost-stock metaphor for how we deal with this as artists. If you're holding the camera, and you're crying too much, you're literally not clear eyed enough to get a focused image. For everybody else.

Jamil Zaki 29:42

I love that. You need to...

Amanda 29:45

I need to write this book.

Jamil 29:48

Ron actually said something like this to me. He didn't say it exactly this dramatically, but let me embellish a little bit. He, in essence, said, if I'm crying, I won't be able to generate an image that makes you cry.

Amanda 30:00

Right. But that's it. And that's actually what I've been feeling on this particular tour that I'm on.

So this tour that I'm doing right now is the most permission I've ever given myself, to be wet-eyed onstage. And there's nothing in the script that says, Amanda, during this song, you're gonna cry, during this story, you're gonna cry, when you get to this point in the show, you're

gonna cry, this is where the audience is gonna cry. There's none of that. But I give myself full permission across this show, which is, by the way, a three and a half hour show, to be as openly tearful as I want to.

And yet, just like the photographer, I always have my hand on a dial. I know how emotional I can allow myself to be, and up to what point, until I hit the point where I'm not actually going to be of use to those people in the audience. And there is a point. And what's so creepy, when you think about it, is how clinical I can almost be about expressing my emotion. Even within a song, I know that if I get too emotional, my voice will freeze. It will crack. I literally won't be able to deliver that sung line. But if I allow myself to feel just enough emotion, and to cry just to the point where I can still deliver the song, and in this case, sometimes I stumble, sometimes I lose it on stage, there have been a few moments in my career where I've literally stopped songs and just needed to sit there in silence for a second and collect myself. And luckily, I have a really forgiving audience, who will sit with anything.

But again, it's this reminder that like these are learned, psychological exercises, almost. Where, if this had only happened to me once in my life, I would really be out there up shits creek without a paddle. But because I've been training every night to keep my hand on that dial, and know that if I'm at 35%, that's different than 39, and different from 71 and a half. It's kind of fascinating.

And it brings up empathy and art, which you talk about so gorgeously in the book. Even just talking about this stage stuff, the first thing that comes to mind to me, and to you probably, and anyone else who's thinking along these lines, is actors. Method actors. What do they do? How do they cry? How do they know? How do they control it? If there are Olympic medals for knowing exactly the tenths of percentages of that dial, it is these Academy Award winning actors who, in the midst of weather, and makeup falling off, and costumes not fitting, and directors yelling, and this that, can still find a way to go there, and to truly empathize with the character that they are embodying, and deliver so that we, the audience, can feel.

Jamil 33:11

Yeah, I write about acting in particular as empathy's extreme sport in a way, because, especially method acting, requires people to practice empathy in multiple angles. You put it perfectly that irrespective of what's happening, and the weather, their makeup, and how many lights are on them...

Amanda 33:39

Or how many takes they've already done.

Jamil 33:40

Yes, and how artificial they know the scene looks from their vantage point, they need to nonetheless live an intimate, or beautiful, or horrific moment, with absolute fervor, and absolute commitment. And that requires... you've called it the heart's imagination, that's exactly what it is.

It's a collaboration between our creative capacity, our capacity to project ourselves anywhere, and to imagine, and our most visceral responses to real things that have happened to us. It's that amalgamation of the imagined and the very, very real, that actors need to embody.

There's another part though, to what you described, that I think is also part of why art is such a, almost like a performance enhancing drug for empathy as well. Because in order for you to know how to adjust your emotions from 35% to 39%, you need to know exactly what 35% feels like to you, and what 39% feels like to you, but you also need to know what those look like to your audience, and how each one of those levels will change their experience. And I think that's part of why I think of producing art as so strenuous empathically, is because it's really two types of empathy at once. It's a control over what you are feeling, with an eye towards how what you're feeling looks and feels to somebody else. It's sort of layers upon layers.

MUSIC BREAK - Machete

Amanda 35:36

So here's something that I'd love to tell you about, that was the biggest struggle, artistically and emotionally, of my teenage years, and following me into my 20s, but mostly in my teenage years, and I even have a great old journal entry, that I must have done when I was 15 or 16. I had kind of a sketchbook journal, ongoing, in a bunch of tattered composition books that I still go back and look at occasionally. I think I called it the evil crying cycle.

I was disturbed and obsessed by the idea of authenticity, when I was a teenager. Is what I'm feeling really real? Is it really real? Or am I doing it to look cool? Or am I doing it to get attention? Or am I doing it to get a rise out of someone? What's real here? I don't get it.

And I made this little drawing, where I'm crying about something sad. And then all of a sudden, I'm conscious of the fact that I'm crying. And I wonder what my crying looks like to someone who might be watching me. And then I feel inauthentic because I feel like I'm performing crying for that person looking. Which in turn makes me cry, because I feel so much shame. But then I feel even more, because if I'm crying harder, but it's not authentic, and it just goes into this spiral of anger, shame, self doubt, and performative-ness. And when I was 15, or 16, I couldn't think my way out of there. I was just like, I'm fucked. No matter what I feel, or no matter what emotions come up, I'm a phony, because I'm always going to be wondering how they look.

And little did I know that at least my ability to be having thoughts like that at 16 were kind of the escape hatch out of there. To be able to realize, well, yeah, it is authentic. And then yeah, you are wondering how this looks from the outside. Those are the same tools, little Amanda, that are going to make it possible for you to be a performer. Because you're gonna be holding those two thoughts, at the same time. The one who's crying, and then the one who's able to see through the camera, with clear eyes.

And it caused me so much grief and agony as a teenager, but when I look at it now, all of that grief, and that self hatred, and all of those sketches, all of that really galvanized me to be able to do this weird job.

Jamil 38:38

I love that story, I have so much to say about it. Do you mind if I share a story of my own?

Amanda 38:43

Oh my god, go on and on and on. This is my podcast, so we can talk for four hours.

Jamil 38:49

I have like, a billion things to say about this. I resonate so much with that feeling, Amanda. I mean, as you know, I open the book by talking about how empathy was a survival skill for me amidst a super long and bitter divorce between my parents that they started, not when I was 10 months, like your parents did with you, but for me was when I was 8, but they didn't finish until I was 12. And two other things really made that time, that four year stretch... well, a bunch of things made it hard, frankly, but two things pop out. One, unlike you, I'm an only child. So I was the only bridge between my parents' worlds, and I didn't have anyone to commiserate with. I think having siblings during parents divorce can be good, because you can kinda look at them and be like, did you just see that? Are you fucking hearing this?

Amanda 39:46

Right, you have an ally and a witness.

Jamil 39:48

Yes, exactly. But also because my parents are culturally super different from each other. My dad's from Pakistan, and my mom's from Peru. And it's not just like their families are from there. They're from there. They moved here when they were 25. Their world views were so far apart, and I just felt like I was the only one charged with understanding both of them. And the only thing at stake was my entire fucking life. You had said earlier, you were in this empathy gym doing push ups and lifting weights and stuff, I would say, and I do use that term, an empathy gym, it was more like empathic forced labor in a way, I mean, I was fucking breaking rocks and trying to generate a shelter. I got in shape, not by casually choosing to empathize, but by being forced into it.

But as I was talking about that experience recently, one of the audience members said, okay, great, so you got really good at understanding their different perspectives, and sort of adapting to their worlds, but how did you know who you were in all of that? I kind of said, well, let me talk to my therapist about that, because...

Amanda 41:04

I'll get back to you in a couple weeks.

Jamil 41:07 37:39

Exactly, but I've been troubled by that... Childhood experience made me who I am, and in the same way as you described, equipped me with the tools for understanding people, and being fascinated by people, and kind of getting them. It also made me feel sometimes adrift in terms of what is authentic, what is real? I've studied this, because I think that's true somewhat of all of us. I don't think it's just you and me. I think we all perform, and are aware, in a way, of our performance, and sabotaged by that awareness.

I ran this study with one of my students where we had people look at emotional images, and sometimes they thought that a camera was on them, and sometimes they didn't. And we found...

Amanda 41:53

And would they act for the camera?

Jamil 41:56

They all act! They were all actors. And so people reported that they didn't feel any more strong emotions when the camera was on, versus when it was off. But they posed stronger emotions, they made more vivid and intense facial expressions.

MUSIC BREAK - You'd Think I'd Shot Their Children

Amanda 42:26

This gets back to why human beings, early human beings, Homo sapiens, beat out other primates, and there was a competition on, right? Like, who's gonna survive? Who's gonna make it? And I'd love for you to talk about how our facial expressions, and ability to read one another, handed us the trophy. Because that's amazing. And it's connected directly to the study we're just talking about.

Jamil 42:57

Yeah, I think so, and to this struggle that you and I, and lots of people have gone through, with whether we're being authentic when we perform emotions for others or adapt to their feelings, right? I mean, I think that the idea that there's some you in there that's separate from everyone else, and that that's the only true you, and if you ever diverged from that, you're being fake, or you're losing your identity. That is such a Western concept, and it is such a modern concept.

Amanda 43:31

Explain, from the perspective of science research in history, what it was about early Homo sapiens, and our capabilities, empathetically, that led us to where we are now.

Jamil 43:42

Back in the day, let's say, I don't know, 30, 40, 50, 60,000 years ago, we were in the environment that would turn us into who we are now as a species. Around 60,000 years ago,

there was no clear evidence that people were going to dominate the planet, right? We were just medium sized mammals, we were not particularly fast or strong, we didn't have sharp teeth or claws, we couldn't fly. And there were at least five other human species with large brains that were pretty intelligent, sharing the planet with us. The thing about Homo sapiens that made us special was that we had each other. We were these little, almost helpless beings individually, but we huddle.

Amanda 44:31

Oh my god, right when you say we had each other, we need to insert some really good, emotional string music.

Jamil 44:38

Oh, I love it, I love it! We huddled in the dark, and kept each other warm, and we worked together. And it was that capacity to collaborate that both shaped us, and allowed us to shape the planet, to take over, to succeed, and flourish. That success is rooted not in the idea that we're each individuals, and that our true self resides inside our body, but rather in the idea that we, and our minds, and our emotions, are distributed things, things that stretch out beyond us, and into the lives and brains and experiences of the people we care about, and are connected to. And so we perform for them, and we read them, and we obsess over them, and what they think of us. And then, add to that, that validation from your group comes when you act more angrily, maybe, than you feel. Well, guess what? You're going to perform that outrage, you're going to perform that hatred. And pretty soon, that performance will become who you are.

Amanda 45:59

There's our exercise metaphor again. Because if you're performing outrage and hatred, whether you're on the left or the right or wherever, and you're being rewarded for it, who's to say where the line of performative-ness is crossing into "reality"?

I definitely learned some really important and valuable lessons about compassion and empathy when I was on the earlier days of the internet, and I was much less kind. I cringe to go back to some of my early tweets from 2007 or 8, or whenever I joined Twitter, but before I really understood the human cost of saying something nasty. And something nasty could even be, I don't really like so and so's work, they're not for me. And in a sense, anyone using social media, especially if you did not grow up digital-native, as we did not, or people my age, and in their 40s did not, we had to learn again, how to twist the dial from what we would say among a group of four or five friends, to what we would say to 40, 400, 4,000, 40,000 people on Twitter. And learning how the etiquette of this new civilization was going to play out.

And also choosing, as I did, to not be an angry, outraged person who was going to go viral by being obnoxious. But to try and actually do what I learned how to do in those days, which is to do a kind of empathetic internet jujitsu, which I literally have been doing in the last four days, as I tweet about my abortions, and people from all over the earth show up to tell me that I'm a killer, and a murderer and I'm going to hell, and how sad it is that my child doesn't have siblings

because I aborted them all, and I'm actually able, because I've practiced so much, I'm actually able to write back to that person and say, no, my child doesn't have siblings right now, but how kind of you to care about my kid, and all my love to your family, and I mean it. Because I know that somewhere underneath all of your outrage and hatred and obnoxiousness, there is an empathetic, beautiful person under there. And I have become so inoculated against your particular fear words, insults, whatever, because I've just been through it so many times, and it just doesn't hurt me. I'm able to reach out, and with no anger and no charge, what you actually do kind of want to hear, but you're saying you don't, which is... I feel your concern. Because why else would you be talking to me, if you weren't concerned?

Jamil 48:58

It's a beautiful capacity that you've developed, and I want to underscore what you're saying is very mobilist. You developed it, right? You developed it in part by suffering through a lot of these types of attacks, and surviving them, and growing through them. And in fact, I write about in the book, trauma is one thing that often increases our empathic capacity. People who have suffered a lot, oftentimes are the most tuned in to others.

Amanda 49:33

You say in the book, there's a kind of altruism born of suffering. It really feels very true. The more shit you go through, the more available you are to people in the dark. Because you recognize the dark, you've been in it, you know what it feels like to grope around in there, and try to find the light switch, and you recognize when other people are doing it.

MUSIC BREAK - Judy Blume

Amanda 50:07

In that same chapter, you talk about the generosity of people who have been through trauma, and I see that so much in my own community. It is often the most war-torn, emotionally scarred people in my community, my own community, my community of friends, my internet community, all over the place. Those seem to be the people who, when they come out the other side, come out with the sharpest tools to help the people who are a few steps behind them.

Jamil 50:44

Perfectly put, and suffering of that type is a tectonic shift in your life, right? I mean, it changes who you are. And we hear so much about PTSD, and for good reason. I mean, it is a devastating force in people's lives. But we hear less about an equally real phenomenon of post-traumatic growth, and the great evidence that people who undergo trauma oftentimes end up with new capacities as a result, including a deep capacity to resonate with the pain and suffering of others, and a deep desire to help people who have been through what they have been through. People who have suffered from addiction, oftentimes become addiction counselors. People who have been assaulted become assault counselors. This is a huge, and very common, thing, where people who suffer trauma will change the trajectory of their life to help others who are going through similar things.

Amanda 51:46

Yeah, not to mention millions of people out there being sponsors, and in programs like AA and NA, because they know. They can empathize. They speak the language.

[There's a beautiful TED talk by Andrew Solomon](#) called... I forget the exact title of the TED talk, but I think it's *The Worst Moments Of Our Life Make Us Who We Are*. It's a gorgeous TED talk, I'll send it to you if you haven't seen it. He was brutally psychologically punished by his family for being gay, in some unspeakable ways, and he talks about building identity around our traumas, and forging meaning. I know this is going to speak to a lot of people in my community because there are a lot of people in my community who have just dealt with so much shit with their families, especially. And it is so important in these moments too, that we not identify so hard as victims of circumstance, that we wind up in the wrong pile. That we wind up really being victims of circumstance, instead of allowing circumstance to forge us. Knowing how to do that, that's really the difficult pivot, is like, okay, well we can say, this we can talk about it, but like, how the fuck do I do that? Easy for you to say, you sound like you're having a great day, Amanda, I'm trying to deal with surviving a rape. How do I get from, how do I walk from here to there?

And what I actually find so fascinating about AA, I've never been through AA, but I've read quite a bit about it, and I have a lot of sober friends. One of the key ingredients in statistically staying sober, is helping others.

Jamil 53:35

There are choices that we make, one of them around accepting help from others, even, you talk a lot about how to ask, and how to be comfortable asking, and how to understand that we're in this together.

One of the hardest things to do after trauma, but one of the most important, is to learn to disclose, and to be vulnerable again, oftentimes because your vulnerability has been so deeply violated, but some vulnerability, especially the emotional type, is often one of the fastest paths to recovery, is to get help from others. Now, when we turn around and are able to help somebody, that in turn helps us in so many ways.

And it's not just in the context of trauma, by the way. There's this fascinating paper called [Giving Time Gives You Time](#), it's one of my favorite recent studies, and it's about this sense that many of us have these days, which is that we're just too fucking stressed to help anybody else. It's just like, there's so much happening in our lives. And it feels as though, if I stop and do something for somebody else, then my capacity to do what I need to do will be diminished. And I'm already overwhelmed, so I'll be necessarily even more overwhelmed. And in this set of studies, the psychologist found that's exactly what people think. They think that helping others will take away from themselves, and their ability to get things done, or to feel like they have time for themselves. The opposite is true, when they actually are forced to help other people. Because they actually end up feeling like, gosh, I have more time than I did before, after helping this

other person. How could that be true? That seems paradoxical. But helping others shows us something about ourselves. Because it's almost like, hey, if I'm strong enough to carry someone else, I must be super strong enough to walk on my own. I must have the agency and the power to be doing alright myself. Because helping other people shows that I'm beyond that. I'm not just surviving, I'm doing something that goes beyond surviving.

MUSIC BREAK - Bottomfeeder

Amanda 56:06

Well, I want to talk about one last thing. I would love to talk about this poem that I'm about to put out, and the poem that I wrote six years ago, to the week. And I'd love some insight from you about everything that happened, because there's so many things to unpack here.

So [the Boston bombing happened](#), and I was in town. It happened only a few blocks from my apartment. And Neil and I were actually renting an extra place, because I needed to be in town to take my best friend Anthony to chemo. So we were just living in this strange liminal space.

The day that the bombing happened, all I did was I sat in terror in my kitchen, and I just kept refreshing Twitter, and talking with people, and answering every single comment. And up until that point in time, this was 2013, I didn't know that Twitter had a tweet limit. I forget what it was, but it was something like 100 tweets every 30 minutes or something, and I kept hitting it. There was a ban on going outside. So my first instinct when this happened was, I want to get my whole community together. Let's go to the Boston Common, let's go to Cambridge Common, let's all be together and look at each other and go, how the fuck did this happen? There's blood on the streets. And this has never happened to us before, we need to be together. That's everyone's instinct, is let's get off the internet, and let's gather. You see it all the time, [you saw it the other day in front of Notre Dame](#), like, that's what we do as a tribe.

But, the police were telling everyone in Boston and Cambridge, do not leave your homes. We're looking for a killer. There is a city wide lockdown. And it was the creepiest thing you've ever seen. Because there were no cars on the streets. It was just like the city went silent. It was some Mad Max shit. And so there I was, in my kitchen, just tweeting every piece of news, every image, every crying, scared person in Boston, and Watertown, and Cambridge, and Newton, and Lexington, and Massachusetts, and New York. And it was what I could do. And I was right there. And I felt like I could use my Twitter platform, and my million followers, to create a gathering space, like some kind of weird, virtual town square, where we could look at each other and say, this is scary, we're scared.

And that is actually the mind frame that I was still in a couple days later, when the lockdown ended and Neil and I had, against the warnings of the cops, driven down to New York for a gig that we were supposed to do, and driven back. And I sat down in this cafe bookstore, and I banged out this stream of consciousness poem. We had had problems with our GPS trying to find a way to get to New York because streets were locked down. He was trying to escape to

New York after carrying out this horrific mass murder. I couldn't imagine what his relationship with his parents were like, his family, his community, the blood he had on his hands, all of this stuff. And then the fact that I was just sitting there in my privilege, safe in this coffee shop, eating a fresh roll. And it all just came together in this spirit of inspiration. [I put this poem out](#), I even showed it to Neil, and I was like, are people gonna yell at me about this? And he was like, no, you're fine.

And then the death threats came into my website. And what was most frightening, and I talk about this in my stage show, and you'll understand this, and having just read your book, it's really... I wasn't shocked to get yelled at by the right wing, who said, Amanda Palmer is this terrible narcissist, awful poet, terrorist sympathizer, and while we're at it, look at these photos of her and her hairy armpits, and who would want to fuck her face? And everything that came along with it. It was 2013. I had been through some shit, Jamil like, I knew from internet hate, and that was not that hard to stomach. In a sense, I could almost wear it as a badge of honor. Like, aha, I stood up and said something about empathy, and look, the right wing is yelling at me like they're supposed to.

But what I wasn't expecting, and what really up-ended me to my core, was the left wing, and the Boston journalists, my tribe, my people, turning around and saying, Amanda, we get it. We know that you believe in compassion and empathy and all that, and that's great. But you've crossed a line. There are people with whom we do not empathize. And this is in really poor taste. You're being so insensitive to the victims. You're being so insensitive to our city. How could you suggest that we fucking empathize with this kid?

And it was like my entire worldview collapsed. Because I just blithely assumed that all these people, my lefty liberal friends, of course, they would think like me. But actually looking back, I'm really glad it happened, was all of these people, when this all happened, and a bunch of Boston blogs and newspapers were like, oh my god, fuck Amanda Palmer, you've got to be kidding... I got all of this private support, which was really double sided, to get all of these text messages and Twitter DMs, from people in Boston saying, oh, my God, man, Amanda, you're really going through it. But just so you know, I'm with you. I'm on your side, and I get this. I just can't stick my neck out and say that in public, I will get slaughtered.

And a lot of it was also about timing. And this is what I think is really interesting psychologically, and also why I'm kind of curious to see what's gonna happen six years on, when these wounds are, you know, in Boston, the wound still bleeds, but it's been cauterized over time. And I was publishing this poem, and putting this suggestion, that we empathize with the 17 year old kid, out four or five days after this bombing happened. And the wound was incredibly fresh. And I think if a lot of people took issue with me, it wasn't necessarily that they were carrying signs saying empathy is bad, fuck empathy, but that this is too soon.

And I still look back at that, and I wouldn't change it. I would double down on it. I would say, it is in these moments, especially now that we're living in a culture of shooting after shooting, and

terrorist attack after terrorist attack, that we have to do that thing, where we're on both sides of the camera. And we have to be able to imagine ourselves into every corner if we are going to find the escape door out of this madness. And that's really what I believe.

Jamil 64:07

There are so many reverberations of what you went through in our culture today. This is really the fundamental struggle of modern empathy, because it's in crisis. We've talked about some of the ways that our emotions are adapted to the ancient world, and not the modern world, and one thing that is really... One barrier that really makes empathy hard is a feeling of threat. If you are under threat, it's extremely... at least in our ancient past, it would have been dangerous to empathize with whoever was on the other side, because that threat was a mortal threat, right? I mean, I would say that a linebacker would be ill served by feeling the pain of a running back, but a soldier who felt the pain of an enemy would be risking their life. And we are not actively, most of us, in war zones right now. And yet parts of our culture, including the way that things are on the internet, make us feel like we're at war all the time, and that empathizing with someone on the other side is a betrayal, it's treasonous, because it's putting our side in a position of weakness, at a moment when that weakness could lead to our deaths. And that's why empathizing with somebody who has actually generated real danger and harm is such a high wire act.

I think about [Truman Capote's In Cold Blood](#), this book about these people who just brutally go into a family home and slaughter everyone there. And yet Capote makes us humanize the killers. Which was such a dangerous thing to do, and all he received enormous amounts of blowback for being a sympathizer. You were called the terrorist sympathizer. What an interesting term, because it actually pathologizes something that's so fundamental to who we are. And yet, it's not giving up the game to empathize with people on the other side. It's not even giving up the game, to empathize with people who have committed atrocities. It's fundamental to maybe having a shot at bringing some of them back into the human species.

Amanda 66:44

[My friend Dylan Marron has this amazing podcast that I just did, called Conversations With People Who Hate Me.](#) You should check it out, it's amazing. And he has a great refrain, that empathy is not endorsement. And I found myself saying this again, and again, and again. I was like, do you guys realize that there is a difference? There's a difference between feeling compassion and empathy and the logic of, yes, of course, this person has to go to prison, what, do you think I'm fucking nuts? And in a sense, it's almost like, again, if we don't empathize with the darkest hearts, sort of like I'm going to say in this poem, it is a small minded failure of imagination that keeps us out of progress and evolution, as a species.

Jamil 67:37

We are so enormously connected to each other, in ways that were unimaginable 20, 30 years ago. That is probably the greatest empathic opportunity in our species' history. And yet, it's also

a fundamental risk to our humanity, because we have these old fashioned emotions mixing with new-fangled technologies, and the two aren't fitting together very well right now.

One of the things that I think is so crucial for us to understand, is that it doesn't have to be that way. We have the capacity to work with our emotions. We often think of them as kind of tempests that just take us over, and that we can't do anything about it. If someone's trolling me on Twitter, there's nothing I can do except be outraged. If I hear about a statistic of people affected by a war, there's nothing that I can do to feel what I would feel if I was looking at an image of a child washed ashore.

But there is. We have a vast capacity to change, and regulate, and tweak, and choose our emotions in real time. And I think one of the things that I really want people to understand is that you can cultivate a curiosity, even as you're being overwhelmed with outrage, or even as you're being underwhelmed by your lack of empathy, or compassion, or feeling, you can become curious about why that's happening, whether that's what you want to happen. And if you decide that you want to make a change to your emotional life, in the moment, or in the long term, you have that power.

MUSIC BREAK - Congratulations

Amanda 69:46

This organization called [Mass Poetry](#) got in touch with me and Neil, and asked if we would come read at a benefit. This is a theater in Boston that fits 800 people, and it's three blocks from the finish line where the Boston Marathon bombing happened. And I thought, oh my God, I've sort of had a follow up poem in my head for years. If I don't write it now, given this opportunity to actually deliver it, in real time, to these people in Boston, I don't know when I'll ever write it.

And so, originally, Neil and I were supposed to read each other's poems. But the day of the event, I read Neil the poem, and he looked at me and he was like, I'm not supposed to read that. That's all you, Amanda. And I was so scared to read it, that I printed out a backup poem. And I didn't decide to read the poem until about 10 minutes beforehand, on stage. That's how afraid I was of feeling the ire and criticism of my fellow Bostonians.

What was really incredible about that night is that, luckily, Neil and I were put last on the bill. And there were 18 other readers before us on this night at the Huntington theater, a beautiful night honoring the power of poetry and change. And people were reading poems by Maya Angelou, and Langston Hughes, and just the feeling of empathy, and possibility in that room, was electric. And then I wound up standing on the shoulders of every reader who came before me. I mean in the themes. By the time I read this poem that I'm about to read you, the themes were just ripe and everywhere, there had been so much discussion of empathy, and imagination, and putting ourselves in other people's shoes, and the medicine of art, and the reader before me was an actual doctor, who talked about feeling empathy in hospitals for his patients. And I was like, this has just been so set up it's not even funny.

But also a real testament to the power of what we are able to tribally do for each other, and how we can infect and uplift each other, with art, with poetry, with music, with the spoken word, with these risks of imagination and expression, that make us all feel a little less crazy, which at its best is what art can do.

And by the time it got to me, and it was the end of the night, I was not only ready to read this poem, I was excited.

So here it is. It was originally going to be called Poem For Poem For Dzhokhar, but Neil suggested that that was too ambitious. So it's just called Empathy is Nothing.

MUSIC BREAK - All The Things

empathy is nothing

but the heart's imagination.

the strange creative act
of surgeon stepping into patient.

the uncomfortable trying on
of shoes that won't slip on
or a burqa
or fatigues
or a backpack
with a bomb.

but the heart's imagination
has its limits, i am told.

**we're all one,
with rare exceptions,
we have standards to uphold.**

**we are strong.
we are unflappable.
we won't be taken down.
and we won't be made to feel afraid
by folks from out of town.**

but what if they are we and us,
and what if us is them?

what if we can't separate so easily...
what then?

there are limits to compassion.

you don't humanize a monster.

but it isn't going to change,
my friends,
until we can feel farther.
until we can gauge suffering on both sides of the slaughter.
until you walk a mile in the heels of every daughter
the assaulted
and the rapist
and the worst
we have to offer.

and thus our hearts are put to task.
the patient dons the surgeon's mask.

ready set
and on your marks

a climate of fear
a race through the dark

a climate of change
the gun bangs

and we...

stop.

there is a crack in everything, remember?

the finish line is lost from sight.

and some are running to the left
and some are running to the right
and they are running for survival
and they are running for their life.

and the heart's imagination
is exhausted by the task.

and every hill is heartbreaking
as everyone runs past
the lawless
and the legless
and the bastards with the bombs

and I can see my child

and my mother

falling down.

and some are running to the left
and some are running to the right
on platforms of austerity
and keeping borders tight.
and I think that Jesus said it

but then again, I'm not so certain
love your enemies
is open to a new interpretation.

love the ones that you can manage
is a more prudent expectation.

**and the teenage boy who's bleeding in the bottom of the boat...
we must admit,
to there
the heart's imagination will not go.
there's a limit to forgiveness.
there's a limit to compassion.
and to love.
to co-existing.
and to peace
and understanding.**

it's the most dangerous of recent acts,
to ban where hearts can go.

it is a different kind of war,

a kind of terrorism
of the soul.

what I want to say, i cannot say.

and some are running to the left
and some are running to the right
but are we running towards the dark...
or are we running towards the light?

what I want to say, i cannot say.
what I want to say is treason.

what I want to say is that
we've won the race
against all reason.

what I want to say is that
we've won the battle
against feeling.

*stand your ground
do not fire unless fired upon
but if they mean to have a war
let it begin here.*

**we are strong.
we are unflappable.
we won't be taken down.
and we won't be made to feel afraid
by these folks from out of town.**

and some are running to the left
and some are running to the right
and some are raising up a wall.
some get shot off that wall by night.

what I want to say is harder.
what I want to say goes farther.

what I want to say is that
we will stay crippled in the darkness
if we cannot feel compassion for the heart that is the darkest.

for the hearts that turn to darkness
all have crucial tales to tell.

and we would sooner cut our ears off than to sit
and listen well.

empathy is nothing
but the heart's imagination.

you can choose to love your enemies,
or you can choose to hate them.

you can choose to love your enemies.

stand your ground.
stand your ground.
stand your ground.

let it begin.

here.

The end.

Jamil 78:02

Wow. That is breathtaking, Amanda. I have so much to say, is there something that you want to talk about? Or should I just...

Amanda 78:17

No, just that, as I read your book, having just written this poem, they were like waltzing partners.

Jamil 78:25

They are companion pieces. I mean, they're exactly aligned. It's uncanny. And I think that what you're capturing is so real. I mean, just the way that our empathy is stretched these days, and the capacity to understand who's on the other side, is exhausting, but also feels, in a way, like a betrayal of the people on our side.

Empathy is the heart's imagination, but it's so tiring right now, for so many reasons. And it's not just hiring for the person feeling it. It seems dangerous to the people around us. It seems like caring about someone on the other side is a betrayal of our own side. And I think there are lots of reasons that that's true, but, God, if we accept that, we're fucked, we're in a lot of trouble.

That is breathtaking, Amanda. I feel like that's almost the poem equivalent of everything that I've been trying to say for a really long time.

This is such a moment of pain. But if we give into it, we will have lost something that is greater than any fight between tribes, or between groups.

MUSIC BREAK - Bottomfeeder

Amanda 80:04

This has been The Art of Asking Everything podcast. Thanks to my special guest Jamil Zaki. You should get and read his book, *The War For Kindness*, right now, it is so good.

The engineers for this interview were Robert Raymond, and Jimmy Garver. The theme song that you are listening to is my own, it's the instrumental to a song called Bottomfeeder, from my 2012 album Theatre Is Evil.

Many, many thanks to my Team AFP, Hayley, Michael, Jordan, and Alex, who are always working behind the scenes to make everything happen. This podcast was produced by FannieCo.

And this whole podcast would not be possible without all of my patrons, 15,000 of them, who are making it possible for this podcast to exist, with no ads, no sponsors, no censorship. Just beautiful, unfiltered, unfettered everything-ness. So please, go to the Patreon, become a member, and support me and my team in making and doing all of this stuff. Patrons also get access to a book club, and they also get access to a follow-up live chat with almost every guest.

Signing off, I am Amanda Fucking Palmer. Please, keep on asking everything.