

On What Makes Us Human

By Drew Spiegel

I am usually still in bed at this time; it is a cool, cloudy morning, and a dense fog blankets the air. It is race day. This is my first 5k in over a year, and I can feel the nerves churning in my stomach. On the start line, I press one knee into the gravelly pavement and put my other leg forward to lean and tie my shoe. My fingers glide through the laces without a second thought as I focus on my breathing. I close my eyes and center myself in the present, blocking out the noise around me. I slowly rise, opening my eyes but keeping them fixed on the course ahead. I complete my final stretches and take more deep breaths as my mind chaotically rushes through nervous thoughts. The race official announces, “On your marks” through a booming megaphone, and I shift my weight forward onto my right leg. Anticipation and anxiety build. “Go!” I propel my body forward and ease into a comfortable stride; I ensure my shoulders are relaxed. I think about landing on my toes each time my foot hits the ground. As thoughts flood my mind, I try to focus on my breathing.

My ability to run does not itself make me human. Countless nonhuman living organisms can run; a stream proves that even water can run. What makes human running distinct is the complex emotions that underlie each stride. Our running is unique because it allows us to foster deep

[SCAFFOLD: A SHOWCASE OF VANDERBILT FIRST-YEAR WRITING](#) | Vol. 6 | Spring 2024

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connections between ourselves, the world, and the people around us. Humans' nuanced and contradictory thoughts allow us to delve into new perspectives and uncomfortable situations. Critical thinking enables us to carefully scrutinize the past, envision the future, and understand multiple truths within the present. To humans, running is more than a physical movement. It is a unique process that consumes the entire body and mind. Humans have no formula; instead, humans are defined by the individual's rich emotional journey and how one can translate these emotions into empathy.

The ability to experience a vibrant multitude of emotions to guide us through the complexities of life is a uniquely human experience. Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh discusses in his book *You Are Here* how embracing suffering can turn negative experiences into forces of good. He writes, "We should not try to escape from our pain. We should look at it directly. Look at suffering deeply, we will have deep insight into its nature, and the path of transformation and healing will present itself to us" (11). Suffering is difficult and painful but ultimately necessary for eventual happiness. Nhat Hanh recognizes how our countless convoluted emotions play into each other to foster growth. Humans have a greater capacity for change than any other species because of our ability to have moments of both intense depression and passionate euphoria. It goes beyond a simple scale of sad to happy; we are capable of emotions like rage, anxiety, guilt, and love. And importantly, we experience these emotions simultaneously – they are fluid and constantly evolving. Our beliefs change as we mature, and gradually, we become more comfortable with uncomfortable feelings.

Our emotions are frustratingly convoluted and often intersect in seemingly irrational ways. But this irrationality is a core part of humanity's uniqueness; not everything is easily

explainable. Seneca explains in his essay “On The Shortness of Life,” “All the greatest blessings cause anxiety, and fortune is never less wisely trusted than when at its most advantageous” (129). The intertwining of our most dramatic highs and lows until they are nearly indistinguishable is frustrating because words cannot fully capture this intricate complexity. Just as Rudolf Otto embraces the illogical nature of the universe with a religious perspective in “The Idea of the Holy,” we must honor the same nuance within ourselves. Each person is their own universe. Therefore, each individual will have parts of their identity that transcend simple explanation. Human emotions are not linear and frequently collide with each other in a calamitous and contradictory manner. No other living being nor any form of artificial intelligence has been able to replicate this range and complexity of emotion; it is purely human.

Soon after my race begins, stride by stride and breath by breath, I try to find a rhythm in my movements. I feel the pain and exhaustion set in as I guiltily ponder the immediate gratification I could receive from quitting. But I am a human, and my emotions are more complex than that. I know there is a future where I receive even greater gratification by finishing the race. So, despite all the pain, I keep going. The thoughts in my head are loud and chaotic, but I try to filter them out. The pain, the ecstasy, the competition, and the urge to give up all hit me at once. I can barely see in front of me because of the thick fog, but I try to pinpoint the people I am trying to catch up to. The earthy smell of the trail around me is strong. Beads of sweat slowly begin to slide down my face. I find the power to keep going despite so much pain. There is dread for the miles ahead, but I stay in the present by reminding myself that I am the closest to the end I have been yet. I can’t get a song out of my

head, and every muscle aches. I am ready to push myself harder.

Running is often assumed to be an individual sport because, for the most part, the runner is the sole determinant of their performance. And to an extent, that is true. But smart running relies on the people around you; one must be able to pace off others, determine when it is time to pass someone, and approximate how much others have left in their tank. Good runners can read what is happening to the other runners around them. Good runners have empathy.

While experiencing a wide breadth of emotions makes humans unique, what truly differentiates humans from any other species or form of artificial intelligence is our ability to utilize our emotions to connect with others. We can understand how others feel in certain scenarios based on how we have felt in similar situations. And while it is impossible to grasp others' problems fully, humans at least can strive to see a world beyond our own. In her article "Of Altruism, Heroism, and Evolution's Gifts," Natalie Angier writes, "Moreover, most biologists concur that the human capacity for language and memory allows altruistic behavior...to flourish in measure far beyond the cooperative spirit seen in other species." Humans have proven that we can transcend our natural survival and reproductive instincts. We sacrifice ourselves for strangers and help others even when there is little personal benefit. And even though not every human exemplifies this, every human at least has the capacity to. Systems of artificial intelligence can fake empathy, but at the end of the day, only the human brain can understand what it is to experience life in all of its complexity. It takes being a human to understand one.

In Antonio Damasio's book *The Feeling of What Happens*, Damasio describes passing an old man boarding a ship in

Stockholm with the help of two crewmates. He notes, “Without consciousness, the two men on deck would not have responded with empathy. Without consciousness, I would not have been concerned and would never have thought that one day I might be him, walking with the same pained hesitation and feeling the same discomfort” (5). We do not just reserve empathy for dramatic moments of altruism and heroism. We use empathy to sense when others are struggling in everyday life and to know what to say next in a conversation. I use empathy as I write this sentence, attempting to fathom how the reader will interpret it. But empathy is not always a force for good. We can hurt people by understanding how others will react to what we do and say. Humans can inflict pain on each other like no other species can because of the unique ways we experience and conceptualize our pain. Understanding the feelings of others gives us power; empathy is a responsibility.

Importantly, empathy is more than actions; it consists of feelings. In Marcus Aurelius’ book *Meditations*, he understates the importance of empathy regarding humans connecting with one another, suggesting, “...your defining characteristic – what defines a human being – is to work with others” (103). Aurelius negates the relevance of empathy in defining humanity. Animals and machines can work with humans, yet neither are humans. Humans have the potential to “work with others” so effectively because of the way we can gain a deep understanding of one another. What defines humans is not the actual work we do but how we do it. We work with others by reading faces, deciphering tones, and drawing back on our past experiences. By excluding the importance of emotional depth in discussing empathy, Aurelius fails to truly capture humanity’s “defining characteristic.” We are complex beings and our

interactions with each other can not be fully understood without empathy.

The wide range of human emotions and the human capacity for empathy are interwoven forces. Humans are intricate and mysterious creatures. So much of the science behind humanity is unknown, and there are parts of ourselves that transcend logic. Language is an insufficient means of communicating our contradictions. As artificial intelligence develops, while it may be able to imitate human writing and speech, it is miles away from resembling our internal complexities. Humans do not use formulas and algorithms; our code is more complicated than we even realize. From the memories of our most beautiful sunrises to the pains of our past that we are yet to grow out of, we are shaped by moments that do not fit into our conscious mind. The human process of learning and growing is irreplicable. It is distinct. It is ours.

I cross the finish line. My legs ache with pain and my head throbs. My heart forcefully beats in my chest. I try to slow my breathing and regain composure as I wipe sweat off my forehead. I am in a state of euphoria and despite my physical weakness, I carry myself in pride. I look around towards the other out-of-breath runners walking around in circles with their hands up on their heads, faces flushed red. I know how they feel, long after I restore my body back to a recovered state. I feel empathy. It is hard for me to put my finger on why I push myself to physical limits for arbitrary accolades, and it puzzles me how my rivals in the race are friends mere minutes later. I do not need to make sense of it. In running, moving my legs is easy; the thoughts in my head make running hard. They are also what make running worthwhile. The moments of emotion that we can not understand, the connections with others that allow us to transcend the universe we center ourselves in —

these are the moments when we unleash our humanity to its fullest potential.

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