

Empathy Makes Us Human

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C43H66N12O12S2. It was difficult to believe, at first, that an incomprehensible string of letters and numbers, lacking pattern or sense, could ever be responsible for the most humane virtue in me. This, in my naive mind, represented the cold, calculated side of our reality; it was a scientific notation that could never represent any true humanity. And yet it's this incorrigible and incoherent string of letters, this polypeptide, that has changed my world and how I perceive it, forever.

Oxytocin is what drives us to help a frail, struggling grandma across the street. It is what made me share my notes with a sick colleague and what, as a result, gave bloom to a beautiful, lasting friendship. And it was the same oxytocin that got me to seek help for that friend years later, the heart-wrenching pain of watching them suffer having become suffocating as a cause of this puny chemical. Empathy is what taught me how to be human. Because without this union and understanding of others, I'd be but a shell of a human living among others, only physically, never emotionally.

I remember to this day walking into the familiar coffee shop to outrun the biting cold that had struck while I waited for the next bus, mumbling out my order and drawing blood from my lips in a futile attempt to keep the tears brimming my eyes from spilling in an avalanche of emotions. After all, the poor barista, a young man seemingly fresh out of college, probably had no interest in dealing with a hormonal teenager whose mood had soured because of a few half-hearted comments thrown around by classmates. My voice trembled and my eyes flitted to the ground... clearly, I'd been failing in keeping up a facade.

I permitted myself a glance at the stranger to check for any signs of judgement, but the face that looked back at me will forever be burned into the depths of my character and soul.

Oxytocin, had it had a scent, would have radiated off of him and enriched the air like a spice, flooding my senses in an instant. He spoke no words to me. Not that any were needed. In not more than a few moments, his eyes told a story unlike any other; I'd seen inside them a sanctuary, tranquillity-filled and ready to assist my ailing soul. This stranger had offered a paradise and yet he had owed none of it to me.

The oxytocin hadn't failed him in the most critical moment. Today, perhaps this man has a family, lives on the other side of the Earth, or has a job. If I may be as bold as to permit myself some freedom of imagination, I'd like to imagine, for the irony of it, that he's become a neuroscientist, and that at this moment, he's giving a lecture on the effects and importance of C43H66N12O12S2, otherwise known as oxytocin, the chemical that enables empathy, that makes us... human. different