



Introduction:

Intercultural learning experts agree that developing empathy for those who are different from us is a key component of intercultural competence. However, are there ever cases where extending empathy would be inappropriate or detrimental? This activity asks you to consider two sides of one coin: 1. Times when you have extended empathy and connected with people who were different from you; and 2. Moments when you have chosen to not extend empathy.

Participant Instructions:

1. Listen to the episode of Alan Alda's podcast *Clear + Vivid* entitled "[Sarah Silverman and the Joy of Enjoying People You Don't Agree With.](#)" Stay tuned for your facilitator's directions on whether you will need to listen to the podcast prior to meeting as a group, or if you will listen as a group. Either way, take notes on how empathy is addressed throughout the episode.
2. Read the *CNN* article, "[Sarah Silverman says she was fired from a movie for an old blackface sketch.](#)"
3. Engage in a short discussion using the following questions:
 - How do Alan Alda and Sarah Silverman define empathy throughout their conversation?
 - How does Sarah Silverman practice empathy in her daily life and through her professional work?
 - At one point, Sarah Silverman questions the egotistical aspect of empathy. She asks, "Do you have to be able to see yourself in someone else to have empathy for them?" What do you think?
 - At another point, Alan Alda asks if there are ever points where "you have to put down your empathy and fight." What do you think he means by this?
 - As cited in the *CNN* article, Sarah Silverman acknowledged that she made an upsetting, hurtful mistake by wearing blackface on her show—a mistake that got her fired from a movie. How do you think that experience shaped her views on empathy?
4. Free write using the following prompts:
 - Sarah Silverman says that her favorite part about talking with people who are different from her is when they are able to put their "porcupine needles down" and truly connect with one another. Write about a time when you were having a conversation with someone who was different from you and you both were able to lower your porcupine needles (i.e., lower your defenses) and find common ground. What made you decide to extend your empathy in that moment?
 - On the other hand, can you think of any moments where you chose to put down your empathy and fight? Or, is there anyone who you cannot empathize with? Why? How did you come to this decision?
5. Once you have finished writing, pair up and share. Then, you will be asked to share with the entire group.
6. Debrief with the following questions:
 - As you heard from other participants, what did you notice were some of the limits to their empathy?

- What are some strategies for deciding when you should or shouldn't extend your empathy?
- Does your empathy extend to Sarah Silverman, or does that incident cross the boundaries of your limit? Why or why not?