

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

AS SUMMER BEGINS, PONDER THE DROUGHT — OF EMPATHY

In the rainless season we call summer in California, images of shrinking bodies of water have a way of looming large.

After more than 22 years of drought compounded by warmer temperatures, Lake Mead and Lake Powell — water sources that are vital to life in the Southwest — have declined to their lowest levels since they were filled. The two reservoirs now sit at just 28 percent of capacity.

But now, I don't have climate change on my mind. Instead, I'm thinking about another reservoir that's nearly empty: our reservoir of empathy.

Empathy is the ability or practice of trying to deeply understand what someone else is feeling. When we empathize, we imagine what it's like to be in another person's situation, as if we're in it ourselves. Sympathy, on the other hand, is a shared emotion, often sadness. It's the difference between feeling someone's pain or feeling sorry for them.

We're in the midst of an empathy drought.

It's reflected in our factionalism on matters including race, gender, politics, religion — even

whether to get vaccinated or wear a mask (still). And Friday's Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe v. Wade leaves no doubt: Contention between supporters and opponents of abortion rights will only deepen.

Still, the empathy drought is almost understandable.

Americans are dealing with a lot these days: a persistent pandemic, mass shootings, natural disasters. Every day, it seems, we are exposed to stressful or traumatic events. Add personal obligations and household challenges, and it's no wonder so many people are feeling emotionally tapped out. We have no more energy to care about others.

Cleveland Clinic psychologist Dr. Susan Albers has said that the loss of empathy — which she calls a "limited resource" — can manifest emotionally or physically. Emotional symptoms can include numbness, self-isolation and feeling overwhelmed, powerless or hopeless. Physically, a person may lose their ability to concentrate, be productive or complete daily tasks. Even close relationships can suffer.

And so, a retreat to our respec-

tive corners, where we find like-minded others, is easy and comfortable.

To be sure, there's no rain dance that will replenish Lakes Mead and Powell. How can we restore our empathy? Albers recommends the "ABC" model:

- **Awareness:** Identify the stressors in your life. Then sit with your emotions, acknowledge how you're feeling, and show self-compassion.

- **Balance:** If things seem awry, spend less time watching the news or scrolling social media. Instead, focus on the basics — things you can control — like diet, sleep and exercise.

- **Connection:** If your empathy tank is near empty, go out of your way to call or video chat with someone you care about. A feeling of connection can be healing.

Empathy plays an important role in workplaces, too. After all, we spend a lot of time working — and a lot of time with co-workers (sometimes more than the time we spend with family members).

Companies have begun to recognize an empathy shortfall in their leadership ranks — and a need to correct it. It makes sense

when you consider that workplace culture is a microcosm of what's going on in society at large. In workplaces, uncertainty, instability and stress can be magnified.

In a recent Harvard Business Review article, "The C-Suite Skills That Matter Most," empathy (among other social skills), is now considered as important as technical expertise, administrative know-how and a track record of successfully managing financial and operational resources.

Authors Raffaella Sadun, Joseph Fuller, Stephen Hansen and PJ Neal wrote, "Top managers are increasingly expected to coordinate disparate and specialized knowledge, match the organization's problems with people who can solve them, and effectively orchestrate internal communication. For all those tasks, it helps to be able to interact well with others."

Those social skills are needed outside organizations, too, as leaders cultivate and maintain relationships with diverse constituencies that expect transparency and accountability.

And thanks to the prevalence

of social media, all of these interactions need to be managed in real time. So, the authors noted, leaders need to be adroit at communicating spontaneously and anticipating how their words and actions will play beyond the immediate context. Beyond devising the right messages, they need to deliver them with empathy.

I'll take this new thinking about the importance of social skills as a positive sign. For one, the ability to connect empathically with others is critical to our lives, helping us to get along, work more effectively, and thrive as a society.

We need to find the energy to care about others — or we run the unacceptable risk of leaving behind a factionalized world for our kids and grandkids. Even with a drop of empathy, we can begin to quench our thirst.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit ncrconline.com (A Path Forward will take its annual summer hiatus in July. It will return Aug. 7.)

ALL-STAR • Inspired to work with seniors because of relationship with grandma

FROM B1

"When she came in a few months ago, she hit the ground running," Colt said. "She brings a lot of joy to our participants and a lot of variety and new ideas."

Lela Vaeao is the seventh of 10 children by the late Liatama Vaeao, a longtime pastor of First Samoan Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in Vista, and his wife, Seipoima Vaeao. As a girl, Vaeao said she was a "tomboy" who loved playing sports in the street with her older brothers. At school, she played soccer and volleyball, but she noticed her father never got the same "sparkle in his eyes" watching her games as he did when he watched her brothers playing football. Football was a family passion. Liatama Vaeao was distantly related to Junior Seau, the Chargers linebacker, who died in 2012.

Eager to get her father's attention, Vaeao signed up in 2005 to play for the SoCal Scorpions in the Women's Professional Football League. Due to her size — she's 5 feet, 10 inches tall — and her background in athletics, she rose fast. She was an all-pro in her first two seasons and she helped lead the Scorpions to their first national championship in 2007. Her father passed away that same year, but not before he saw her triumph in the sport.

"I saw that sparkle in his



Dr. Ross Colt, medical director at the Gary and Mary West PACE center in San Marcos, says Lela Vaeao has given a lot of variety to the center's senior clients, bringing in new ideas.

eyes when he watched me play football," she said. "And every time I pancaked someone (meaning knocked the player flat on the field) he would stand up and shout, 'That's my daughter, that's my daughter!'"

In the years since, she has played for several teams, including the San Di-

ego Surge, West Coast Lightning, California Quake and, most recently, the San Diego Rebellion. She has been on a hiatus from the team for the past year to care for her sister, who has kidney failure. But she plans to start playing again later this year.

She also plays for the

American Football Events Team USA All-Stars, which has taken her to games around the world. On March 11, 2020, she and more than 50 other AFE team personnel flew to Honduras for a bowl game and they became stranded when COVID shut down international borders. A little over a week later,

they were airlifted out by the U.S. Air Force. With the pandemic now fading, Vaeao said she'll fly to Florida in September to compete for the AFE in a 9/11 memorial bowl game.

The PACE center in San Marcos was built to serve low-income seniors who qualify for Medicare and

Medi-Cal. The PACE program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly, is designed to fulfill the needs of seniors who still live at home with no transportation of their own. Seniors get picked up at home and driven to the center a couple of times a week for full medical care, physical therapy and exercise, socialization, personal care services, a hot lunch and more.

Dr. Colt said that for many of the program's participants, those semiweekly visits to PACE may be the only time each week they see or speak to another person. That's why having caring employees like Vaeao can mean so much.

Connie McBride, an 80-year-old retired kindergarten teacher who lives at the Morningside Terrace assisted living center in Escondido, enjoys her visits to the PACE center, especially since Vaeao arrived. They first met years ago when Vaeao worked at Morning-

side. "She's an incredible lady," McBride said of Vaeao. "She's just a very kind person who's very giving of her energy and time. She has this skill of meeting people where they're at in their abilities and encouraging them to give something new a try. She's wonderful."

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MORRIS He will be sworn in on July 22

FROM B1

selection that if he dropped the case, he would be off the hook for attorney fees.

But the jury sided with Morris and awarded Daniel's parents \$3.2 million, a repudiation of the county's attempts to paint him as an irresponsible drug addict.

Earlier this month, Morris was selected by Gov. Gavin Newsom to be a San Diego Superior Court judge. His last day at his law practice was Thursday. He will be officially sworn in on July 22.

The Sisson case served as an early warning of failings in local jails that would ultimately lead to the county having the highest mortality rate among California's large jail systems. Evidence Morris uncovered in the case would later be highlighted in a scathing state audit — released earlier this year — of San Diego County jails. Inadequate safety checks were a key issue for auditors. Surveillance video presented to the jury in the Sisson case showed deputies doing what Morris called "drive-bys," walking quickly past Daniel's cell, barely glancing in as the young man suffered a slow death from suffocation.

The case also underscored the dangers of unmonitored opiate withdrawal. Earlier this month, more than a decade after Daniel's death, the jails added the option of medication-assisted treatment to ease the painful withdrawal process and help alleviate drug cravings.

Morris said he would like to see more reforms.

"Unfortunately, even though they're making pol-

icy changes on paper, it hasn't translated to a decreased number of deaths in the jail," he said.

"(Policies) are still, *you may do this or you can do that*. ... The policies are deficient in giving clear, unambiguous direction — if you see something, you have to do something."

Morris would go on to specialize in cases involving jail deaths and injuries. Last year, he and co-counsel Danielle Pena secured a \$2.95 million settlement for the widow of Heron Moriarty, a father of three who died by suicide — also in the Vista jail — in 2016.

Michelle Moriarty said Morris immediately made her and her kids feel like family. She said she broke down in tears when Morris told her that he had participated in a suicide prevention walk in Heron's memory.

"I know we will remain friends after all this is over," she said.

Morris told The San Diego Union-Tribune that, as a judge, he will use what he has learned litigating jail cases.

"Coming from a prosecutorial background, I had a perception of anybody in jail as an inmate," he said. "Over the last 15 years, that perception has changed dramatically. I see them as people who have sad stories to tell and people who really, despite what they've done in their lives, still deserve and need to be protected and they need to be heard."

Morris is a San Diego native with deep ties to the region. He graduated from Grossmont High School and San Diego State University. His father was a deputy city attorney and labor negotiator for the city of San Diego; his great-grandfather was San Diego's first Latino fire captain. His grandfather was also a fire captain; Morris has his captain's helmet on a shelf in his office.

Morris said he applied for a seat on the bench because

it had been a lifelong goal and the stress of civil rights litigation was starting to impact his health. Still, leaving his law practice was difficult, he said.

"Being a civil rights attorney is not for the faint of heart; it really takes a lot out of you," he said. "I don't think that you can go into this line of work without feeling and experiencing and appreciating the trauma that (your clients) have suffered in their lives and really dedicating yourself at the risk of everything else to bring them justice. I just don't think that it's something you can do forever."

Danielle Pena, who's been with Morris since the Sisson case, is starting a new firm, PHG Law Group, with Byron Husted and Jacob Gillick, attorneys who handled corporate, estate and criminal litigation for the Morris Law Firm. Pena will handle the half-dozen pending jail cases.

Pena, who described Morris as compassionate and open-minded, said she's "overwhelmingly proud" to see him appointed to the bench.

"I know that the knowledge and expertise he has gained in representing both plaintiffs and defendants will lead him to be a fair and just judge," she said.

Civil rights attorney Gene Iredale also praised Morris' work. "He did a magnificent job in the Sisson case," Iredale said. "He dealt with a great deal of expert testimony; he presented the case very well to the jury. That was one of the first major civil rights verdicts in a jail death in the county."

Iredale agreed that this kind of litigation can take its toll, especially when a case takes four, five or six years to resolve.

"The skills that are demanded of the lawyers in these wrongful death cases are not only legal skills but

the ability to deal with the psychological issues surrounding mourning and loss," he said, "the necessity to try to encourage people to hang in even though the case is seeming to drag on forever and ever and the ability to try to listen and understand, which is the hardest thing of all."

Marc Carlos, a criminal defense attorney who has known Morris for more than two decades, described him as "incredibly well-respected as a trial attorney."

"With a good set of facts, he can do anything," Carlos said.

And he cares about his clients, he added. Carlos had represented a man in criminal court who was severely beaten by deputies in the San Bernardino jail. He called Morris to see if he would take the civil case. A jury awarded the man \$75,000 for his injuries and a judge awarded Morris \$700,000 in fees. Morris shared half with the man, which he thought was only fair.

When Morris learned the man, who had struggled with addiction, had fallen back into using drugs, he called Carlos.

"Chris called me and said, 'Hey, we really need to help Tim out.' He got me back on board." Carlos is currently representing the man.

"He's going to make an excellent judge," Carlos said. "He has an open mind, he treats people with respect and people really open up to him, which is a good thing."

Iredale agrees. "You know the famous saying that people will never remember what you said, but they'll never forget how you made them feel? Chris is like that. He has the ability to put people at ease; even in a situation in which he's fighting on the other side, he's always amiable, respectful and decent."

Davis is a freelance writer.

LOT City may apply for \$10M grant

FROM B1

the shelter, but we've talked to the county, and they were hopeful," said Greg Anglea, president and CEO of Interfaith. "But all of that was just too nebulous. None of it was clear. And unfortunately, the county does not appear to be making that commitment for operational funding for any additional shelters."

While the county has committed to providing access to its behavioral health services and case management for any new shelter, Anglea said they're not funding additional staff members for those services, and he fears existing staff would be stretched thin at new facilities.

"We believe the county needs to step up and provide additional services for new shelters, not just existing resources," he said. "The existing resources will not be sufficient."

Anglea said Interfaith was very interested in helping Vista open a shelter because he sees a pressing need for more beds to get homeless people off the street in North County.

"Right now in North County, we have 99 beds," he said. "That's pitiful when you have 1,400 homeless people in North County identified in the point-in-time count."

Interfaith did bid to run Oceanside's shelter, which is expected to open later this year, but the Oceanside City Council chose the San Diego Rescue Mission instead. Anglea said Interfaith bid for that shelter because the city had committed \$700,000 in operational costs, and that

money could help fund behavioral health services at the facility.

Daniels said the two other service providers that expressed interest in operating a Vista shelter were the San Diego Rescue Mission and Operation Hope. Neither submitted formal proposals, but for reasons different than Interfaith's, she said.

Daniels said San Diego Rescue Mission President and CEO Donnie Dee said they were in the process of opening the Oceanside shelter and another in National City, so the timing wasn't right to take on another. Operation Hope, which operates a shelter for women and families, also saw the timing as not right because they have a new executive director, she said. The move would have been a significant transition for Operation Hope, she added, because its shelter has restrictions on who it will take in, and the new shelter would have a low-barrier policy, meaning people are not turned away in most cases.

Daniels said the city is closer to opening a safe parking lot than a shelter, so that will be its next focus. She said the city also may apply for part of a \$10 million grant the county is offering to cities to help open shelters, safe parking, safe campgrounds or related programs. Sites for the parking lots already have been identified, she said, and the county is prioritizing cities with near-ready plans in the grant program.

The city also plans to release requests for proposals to create permanent supportive housing this August, she said. Millions of dollars left over from the city's redevelopment agency, which was dissolved by the state in 2012, and Vista is allowed to use the money for permanent supportive housing, Daniels said.

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