



Survival Is Not Coldness: Withholding Empathy as Resistance

When someone dies—especially someone powerful, controversial, or harmful—we’re often told that “the right” response is empathy. That if we don’t grieve or soften, we are somehow failing at being human. But for people and communities who’ve lived under harm, withholding empathy isn’t cruelty. It’s survival.

Empathy is Labor

Empathy takes energy. It asks you to enter into someone else’s pain, to make space in your body and heart for their suffering. For marginalized people, that labor is already stretched thin—navigating racism, xenophobia, poverty, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, all while keeping each other alive. When an oppressor dies, being asked to “feel for them” often means pouring scarce energy into the very structures that hurt you.

Safety in Boundaries

Empathy makes us vulnerable. When extended toward someone who would not extend it back, it can reopen wounds or create new ones. Withholding empathy becomes a boundary—a way of saying: *I will not sacrifice my safety to honor someone who never honored mine.* That is survival.

Generations Have Taught Us This

Across history, oppressed peoples have learned to withhold empathy as a survival code. Enslaved people knew not to empathize with the master’s pain. Colonized people knew not to grieve the death of those who extracted their land and lives. To withhold wasn’t heartlessness—it was clarity. It was the wisdom that not everyone deserves equal access to our tears.

Choice Is the Key

Some find healing in extending empathy even toward oppressors. Others find healing in refusing. Both are valid. What makes it survival is *the right to choose*—without guilt, without coercion, without finger-pointing.

The Truth

Refusing to feel empathy for an oppressor doesn’t mean you’ve lost your humanity. It means you’ve reclaimed it. Survival is not coldness. It’s knowing that your energy, your grief, and your empathy are precious—and choosing carefully where they flow.