



A response to human suffering Empathy and Compassion

Grief in the time of COVID-19

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A while back, I read a story about a man who lost everything. Tragically, all his children were killed in a freak accident. Later that day, thieves had broken into his house and robbed him of all his possessions. And if that wasn't enough, not long afterward, he was inflicted with some type of mysterious illness that left him with painful sores covering his entire body. As a grief counselor, reading the account of this man's heart-rending story, I was initially struck by the response of his friends who, as soon as they heard the devastating news dropped everything and traveled long distances to be with him. As the story goes, at first, they didn't even recognize him, but when they realized who it was, they wailed aloud and tore at their clothes; such was their distress over their friend's situation. But then this interesting thing happened; they knew better than to try to cheer him up or to offer advice. Instead, their first instinct was to just sit with him in his suffering, in silence, for seven days and seven nights!

Those who are familiar with the biblical *Book of Job* will recognize this fictional story. It was written down several millennia ago to try to respond to the age-old question of human suffering. I find what's so insidious about suffering is that it not only impacts the present,

it also suffocates hope. The story goes on to say that when Job was finally able to speak, in his despair, he cursed the day he was born. That's when his friendly encounter took a turn for the worst. What followed was a series of long declarative speeches that explored possible, and to Job's and my mind, ultimately unsatisfactory answers to this universal problem of the human condition.

In more contemporary times

It's hard to believe it's been two years since the first cases of COVID-19 were identified in Wuhan, China, in December of 2019. The questions posed by tragedy (pandemic, war, natural disaster, personal loss, and trauma) and our dilemma of responding to others in difficult situations are once again made manifest in our world on a global scale. It is reassuring that, as in the *Book of Job*, many philosophical and religious traditions have attempted to respond with answers to those big, existential questions, should you choose to explore which ones make the most sense to you. The challenge is that finding satisfactory answers takes time, research, and no small degree of emotional energy that in our prolonged grief and pandemic fatigue remains in short supply. While important,

I'd suggest that if we jump too soon to looking for the answers, we will miss the critical first steps needed in this and other enduring times of crisis.

Empathic Presence

The first step in our response to those who have suffered any tragedy needs to be what was demonstrated by Job's friends. Their behavior exemplified empathic presence. In other words, they made an effort to reach out to their friend in a timely way. They felt their friend's suffering, literally joining him as he sat on the ground covered in ashes without feeling the urge to say anything for seven whole days. We can think of the number seven as representing an extended period (or the "right amount") of time, however long that needs to be. That silence was also essential. They did not feel compelled to fill the space between them with lots of words; after all, what can be said in the face of such overwhelming devastation? They didn't try to cheer him up, thus sparing their friend all those awkward, "You're strong. You'll get through this," "Look on the bright side, she isn't suffering anymore," or "Come on, come to the party. It will make you feel better," kind of comments that plague contemporary attempts at condolence. It takes emotional courage to really sit with someone else's suffering, to realize that whatever we say or do will ultimately fall short because we do not have the power to take away someone else's pain or bring the dead back to life. In times like these, what is called for is more than a one-and-done sympathy card, text message, or Facebook post. What we need is empathy, an effort to stop and imagine what it might feel like to be in the other person's situation. Empathy is not just a hypothetical thought experiment; it involves both the head and the heart. The silence is essential because it allows us to sit with those problematic emotions inside ourselves. Then, out of being

present to that mix of thoughts and emotions, we let it inform what our next step might be.

A word of caution

Don't assume anything. Please don't assume that they must be devastated by the loss. Don't assume the deceased was the same type of person inside the home, and they appeared to the outside world. We can never know exactly what another person is feeling; so, our response is not, "I know exactly how you feel." This is not the time for advice, "You should" And in moments like these, it is not appropriate to talk about how their loss triggers your own feelings of anxiety about losing your loved one. The danger of referencing our own emotions is to presume that the other person feels the same way. An empathic leap can sometimes lead us to jump to the wrong conclusion, so we should take our shoes off and tread softly whenever we attempt to walk into someone else's suffering.

When we open our mouths

A better response might be, "I've tried to imagine what you are going through right now, and I'm sure I don't know, but I want you to know I'm willing to support you as best as I can, for as long as it takes." Of course, that requires an honest self-assessment and, obviously, the follow-through. Additionally, you can say, "I miss him too." "Life will never be the same without her." A sincere personal statement about your concern for the person who grieves is also appropriate. "My heart breaks for you." "I wish I could help you carry this burden." "I love you." The key is not to define or even match their emotional level but to validate it. To be empathically present means, I understand you have a right to your emotions; I'm not going to judge you, minimize how you feel, or try to convince you that you should feel otherwise. I just want to be here with you right now. Is it enough? Not always, but it helps.

It's amazing how this empathic presence happens every time a grief support group gathers, usually in person, but as we've discovered during this time of social distancing, it also occurs in online groups. Instead of wallowing in self-pity and misery, as some people might think, support groups can actually be up-lifting. The experience of grief reminds us that connection is not dependent on proximity; space and time and even mortality can only separate us from physically touching one another. However, connection has always been more a matter of the heart. When we bring a group of people together who have experienced a similar loss, there is less of an empathic gap needing to be bridged than even with those who love us but have not experienced the pain of losing a loved one. And even though each person in the group is different, each relational dynamic was unique, and the circumstances surrounding each loss distinct, what we hear from participants over and over again is, "They get it. Even though it really doesn't change anyone's situation, it helps because I know they can relate to how I feel, and I don't feel so alone."

Roadblocks to empathy

I'm convinced empathy is the first necessary step in our long journey to transforming the world, one person at a time. These days, we don't have to have an active imagination in order to gain an understanding of human suffering. One glimpse of a news media outlet illustrates it is all around us. And yet, the suffering, although at times pervasive, is never evenly disbursed. Some people even benefit in times of crisis and loss. No, it's not fair, which adds to the suffering.

In the face of so much suffering, the temptation is to *flee*, to "keep busy," to turn our heads away, to distract ourselves, or to anesthetize the

pain with whatever numbing agents that may be at our disposal. Those strategies may work for the short-term, but as this pandemic has and personal grief always lasts longer than anyone expects, many realize that we've got to try something else. Please don't misunderstand; everybody needs to take a break once in a while from whatever long-term stressors we are experiencing but climbing into a dark cave to lick our wounds only makes us further isolated. I guess we could also circle the wagons and focus on only those people who are in our immediate circle, or "pod," as we've been calling it these days. The outcome of this strategy is a sense of us versus them; those who are part of the in-group are deemed safe, and everyone else on the outside of our small group is perceived as the enemy, a threat to our survival. Alternatively, in the face of personal suffering or witnessing the suffering of people we care about, many lash out. We call it the *fight* response. While there are clear examples of medical malpractice or empathic failures on the part of healthcare providers, while there are identifiable perpetrators of injustice, violence, and abuse in our communities and in our world, that fire in the belly which is meant to protect and defend and ultimately empower us to work for change more often results in a scorched-earth policy. It ends up consuming everything in its path. Scapegoats, conspiracy theories, victim-blaming, rationalization, and justification are all psychological mind-games that we play, usually without even realizing it. We should never fool ourselves into thinking that any form of us versus them in any way contributes to the relief of suffering; it only lobbs it, like a hand grenade, somewhere else.

All of the above approaches to the experience of suffering are roadblocks to empathy. They lead to isolation and entrenchment, and ultimately *Apathy*,

empathy's antithesis, which means, "I don't care."

Compassion's soothing balm

I believe we should care because caring is the only ointment that can reach within and soothe a wounded, grieving heart. Empathy is the first step, but by itself is not enough to go the distance. To relieve suffering, we need to go a step further. I define compassion as "concern for the suffering of others, combined with the desire to do something about it."

Sometimes we cannot, like Job's friends, drop everything to be physically with a person in their suffering. We may live too far away, we might be dealing with our own health issues or another's pressing need. As much as we would like to be there, it is often just not possible. Living with pandemic and anxiety for an extended period of time has served to magnify our grief, and many have been denied the consolation that comes from being with loved ones in times of illness, death, and grief. The desire might be there, but to be transformative, empathy must be made manifest in some way.

Over the years that I've worked at NorthShore Hospice, I've noticed one common denominator in the stories of consolation that people share with me. Those who have previously experienced some type of loss usually offer the most meaningful condolences to the recently bereaved, and they tend to remain supportive long after everyone else has drifted away. Basically, they get it. Although every person's story of loss is unique, those who have lost can relate, and they feel compelled to act in at least one of three ways. Grief educator, Kenneth Doka, PhD., suggests we have three kinds of friends, **1. Listeners, 2. Doers, and 3. Respite-givers**. As the names suggest, some people are good at listening and being a quiet presence. Others are better at fixing and doing things and

will show up in a heartbeat when needed. Finally, still others may not be all that great at either of the above, but their superpower is the ability to make us laugh, to forget about our problems momentarily, to de-stress, and thus provide us with a much-needed break from the heavy burden of grief. Compassion (the word means "to suffer with") in whatever form makes grief half as heavy because when someone is empathically present to us (physically, emotionally, or spiritually), we realize we longer have to carry it alone.

With empathy and compassion, we will find a way to get through the present challenges. At some point, the COVID-19 pandemic will be history, and someday, you will emerge from your grief with your strength restored and a renewed perspective on what really matters in this life. Maybe not now, but someday when you are willing to make that leap and enter into someone else's suffering, you will discover our shared humanity in the course of that encounter. When you respond in some way to that other person's woundedness with compassion, you will realize that instead of it feeling overwhelming, both people in the encounter experience momentary relief. At that moment, hope for the future is restored. We may not be able to heal the world of all its ills, but compassion becomes a soothing balm that gives us the strength to rise up from the ashes and carry on.

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